



Ageing Mindful

IO3 – Comparative Report Pilots: 1 and 2 Support Groups

*Produced by
Inova Consultancy*

July 2023



INDEX –

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION TO THE MINDFUL AGEING SUPPORT GROUPS	3
RECRUITMENT PILOT 1 AND PILOT 2 SUPPORT GROUPS	4
OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS FOR PILOT 1 AND PILOT 2	4
THE FORMAT AND DELIVERY OF THE PILOT 1 AND PILOT 2	6
INOVA - UNITED KINGDOM	7
FINAL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK UK	10
E SENIORS - FRANCE	12
FINAL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK FRANCE	14
BICC - BULGARIA	16
FINAL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK BULGARIA	17
VAMK- FINLAND	19
FINAL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK FINLAND	21
IED - GREECE	23
FINAL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK GREECE	23
IMPACT OF THE MINDFUL AGEING SUPPORT GROUPS.....	26
CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS	31
PARTNERS	34

Executive Summary

An ageing population is one of the biggest social and economic challenges that European societies face in the 21st century. The growing elderly population will lead to higher expenditures in public finances, i.e. higher expenditures for pensions, long-term care, health care, education and other necessary social interventions. As population ageing trends increase each decade, present models of health service delivery will be challenged to cope with the increased demands. Going forward support services need to be further developed, and quality should be improved. Particular attention should be paid to both public (i.e. formal health services and long-term care) and informal care (i.e. family and friends). Professionals should be trained to deliver support programmes which meet the needs and which support our elderly population to explore self help and ways to stay healthier for longer.

As older people in Europe live longer, it is important to provide them with enough options to make the most of their retirement. By living happier and healthier lifestyles that cover social, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing then the concept of active ageing can be embraced. Generally, older adults can remain healthier and productive for longer post retirement and enjoy having longer lives rather than feeling a burden to family or society. Happier retirements equals higher levels of life satisfaction and healthier lives - this level of happiness is cascaded to other family members and friends who will be less likely to be required to take on care duties that would increase their own stress levels and thus impact negatively on health service.

Isolation amongst older people has been greatly affected by the COVID pandemic. Being told you are vulnerable has created negative mindsets, even if good intentions were initially meant. Older people can be strong, physically and mentally and with strong social networks to help them stay positive, giving them a sense of belonging and will support them through crisis situations. Taking pressure off the health services, in particular around Mental wellbeing will allow for better use of limited resources and thus lead to healthier communities. As such the Mindful Ageing project has the potential to benefit all ages by fostering an approach that cares for people who are over 50 and being inclusive to ensure everyone can move towards retirement being as healthy as is possible.

Introduction to the Mindful Ageing Support Groups

The Mindful Ageing Support Groups form part of the Mindful Ageing Erasmus+ project, which supports older people to lead healthier lifestyles, remain involved in their community for longer and to give value to their communities by their engagement and volunteering. Research shows that isolation has been exacerbated post the Covid 19 pandemic and in particular for the ageing population. Using a range of tested theories along with innovative methodologies around mindfulness and positive psychology, the support groups allow individuals over 50 to bring their own issues to the discussions before setting individual goals for improving wellbeing. In addition, social networks are improved with positive interventions that encourage positive lifestyle choices. Based on the Circles™ methodology developed by Inova Consultancy, the Mindful Ageing support group sessions were adapted to meet the needs of this target group with the emphasis on promoting mindfulness and positive thinking. The mentoring methodology emphasis of the Circles aims to empower individuals to work through their SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals individually, while being supported and held accountable by their peers. The general structure includes meeting in a small group with a facilitator overseeing the group. The facilitator explains the process and each individual gets a turn to speak about their current goals, challenges and opportunities.

After delivery of the training for the Mindful Ageing Bootcamps, all partners participated in 2 pilots of the Support Groups, with some being delivered face to face and some online. Each pilot consisted of 3 sessions, at the end of which each partner produced an individual National report. There are 6 partners for this project with CCS (Ireland) being the Information Technology partner and as such they did not participate in IO2 or IO3 delivery. This comparative report is based on the reports produced by our participating partners, who are as follows: -

- Inova Consultancy - UK
- VAMK - Finland
- BICC - Bulgaria
- E-Seniors - France
- IED - Greece

The comparative report will provide a comprehensive summary of the findings within each organisation's national reports and evaluate effectiveness of the Support Groups which have followed on from the highly successful Mindful Ageing Bootcamps that were conducted for IO2 of this project.

To find out more about the Mentoring Circles™ methodology, please watch a short video here: <https://youtu.be/LAbwRFRTxeU>

Recruitment for Pilot 1 and 2 Support Groups

Five partner organisations delivered 2 pilots of the Support Groups, following delivery of the Mindful Ageing Bootcamps (IO2). In all countries, most of the recruitment took place during the final session of the Bootcamp where the Support Groups were introduced and participants invited to join. As the group numbers were much smaller than the Bootcamps, some participants were identified as in need of further intervention and approached directly. It was more beneficial for participants to have engaged in the Bootcamps first, although other requests were considered if places were available as the Support Groups had been promoted on internal and external social media sites. Times and dates also influenced availability of attendance. The Bootcamps had already used a range of marketing strategies with further details to be found in the IO2 reports relating to the marketing for the Mindful Ageing programme. In addition, recruitment and dissemination were discussed regularly during partner meetings to ensure any partner needing support could access a range of ideas and solutions for recruitment.

Overview of Participants for Pilot 1 and 2

For each pilot of the IO3 Mindful Ageing Support Groups, partner organisations aimed to involve a minimum of 5 adults aged 50+. Some participants were already familiar with concepts relating to mindfulness and positive psychology as this was explored during the Bootcamps, which had covered a wide range of topics to explore wellbeing in later life as well as theories on mindfulness and psychology. Attendees were mainly women, with men proving to be the hardest to reach for this project. There was a good mix of status with different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, and current health conditions and needs.

Some participants were dealing with crises, such as a recent bereavement or their own change in health. Managing long term illness was a topic that formed part of the discussions and looking for ways to maintain a positive outlook was a key concept. All the participants were dealing with living in a post covid society, post retirement or close to retirement age. As some participants are still in work and not yet retired, for them it was more a time to be reflective and think about goals whilst moving forward towards retirement.

The following chart shows details of the training dates that took place for the Mindful Ageing Support Groups followed by a chart showing details of the number of participants per partner:

Dates:

Inova Consultancy (UK)	Pilot 1	27/5/22 online 10/6/22 online 17/6/22 face to face
	Pilot 2	3/11/22 online 10/11/22 online 17/11/22 online
E Seniors	Pilot 1	6/7/22 face to face 13/7/22 online 20/7/22 online
	Pilot 2	15/11/22 blended 22/11/22 blended 29/11/22 face to face
BICC	Pilot 1	23/5/22 online 23/6/22 face to face 27/6/22 face to face
	Pilot 2	30/5/23 face to face 1/6/23 face to face 6/6/23 face to face
VAMK	Pilot 1	23/5/22 face to face 16/8/22 face to face 25/8/22 face to face
	Pilot 2	11/1/23 face to face 18/1/23 face to face 24/1/23 face to face
IED	Pilot 1	7/7/22 online 15/7/22 online 20/7/22 online
	Pilot 2	3/3/23 online 10/3/23 online 13/3/23 online

PARTICIPANTS - PILOTS 1 AND 2

	Piloting stage	Number of participants	Total number of participants
Inova Consultancy (UK)	Pilot 1	5	12
	Pilot 2	7	
VAMK (Finland)	Pilot 1	5	9
	Pilot 2	4	
BICC (Bulgaria)	Pilot 1	5	10
	Pilot 2	5	
E-Seniors (France)	Pilot 1	5	10
	Pilot 2	5	
IED	Pilot 1	6	11
	Pilot 2	5	
Total			52

Format and Delivery of Pilot 1 and 2

Generally participants joined the Mindful Ageing Support Groups after engaging in the Mindful Ageing Bootcamps. This was a good basis and format for going forward as most participants had already been introduced to the project and the facilitators. However, although an agreed format was developed by partners, due to the very nature of the Support Groups, it was also agreed to have flexibility to allow for differentiation and the diverse needs of the participants. This proved necessary due to different circumstances of attendees, whether the sessions were online or face to face and also taking into account a post covid world, where generally people's habits had changed, especially for those who had already retired and had struggled to rebuild social connections post covid. All facilitators on the programme were made aware of this format prior to any of the Support Circles taking place.

During each session, participants were allocated time to discuss their own challenges or issues with the rest of their peers before setting realistic goals. Some partners found that the nature of the discussions were quite intense, for example managing discussions on illness and bereavement. All facilitators were very experienced to manage any difficult discussions within the group. For some partners, participants were looking for ongoing benefits that the Bootcamps had awakened them to and were wanting to include more mindfulness practice as well as their group discussions.

All partners used feedback from pilot 1 to make minor amendments before delivery of the 2nd pilot of Mindful Ageing Support Groups, if this was deemed necessary. However generally partners were happy with feedback from the first pilot and no major adjustments were deemed necessary. Adjustments were made if the Support Groups were online to ensure that the activities chosen met the needs of learners.

Inova Consultancy (UK)

The first pilot took place between May – June 2022 after recruitment from the UK Mindful Ageing Bootcamps. There were 3 Support Sessions in total with 2 taking place online via ZOOM and the final one being face to face. The sessions were facilitated by Marina Larios (trainer and clinical hypnotherapist), who had also facilitated the Mindful Ageing bootcamps. There were 5 participants for the first pilot. The concept of the Support Groups was explained in the first session and all attendees were open to the idea of peer support to address issues around mind, body and managing ageing related issues. In view of the sensitive topics that were discussed, participants revisited the group agreement set in the Bootcamp training. All participants were given an allocated time slot to address their individual

challenges or issues, before getting support from their peers and exploring mindful activities to support their needs. Participants engaged in setting SMART goals and committed to working on at least one issue ready to give feedback at the following session. Participants had equal time dedicated for their issues/challenges. A PowerPoint presentation was given at sessions 1 and 2, to cover key topics and theories around mindfulness and positive thinking and participants engaged in a range of activities. Each session followed a similar format as shown below: -

- Icebreaker and Mindfulness Activity.
- Development tools for Positive Health .
- SMART Goal setting
- Circle in Action

In addition, during the first session, some inspirational, positive quotes were shared that related to ageing along with graphics concerning wellness and mental wellbeing. The tree of change was discussed with a view to support goal setting and being open to change.

The final Mindful Ageing Support Session encouraged more reflection especially as this was face to face and included a walk through the Botanical Gardens and a discussion about the important role nature can play in wellbeing. PowerPoint slides were given as handouts and formed part of the discussions during the walk and during the Circle which took place in the gardens. Evaluations were completed after each session with some comments given below:-

“Celebrate and notice small successes”

“Highly motivated as can see positive benefits”

A Final Evaluation Form was completed by participants at the end of the final session. This included asking the participants the usefulness of the session and how the sessions have helped them to incorporate mindful living into their daily routines and set themselves goals to support active ageing. Below are some of the results from the questions posed.

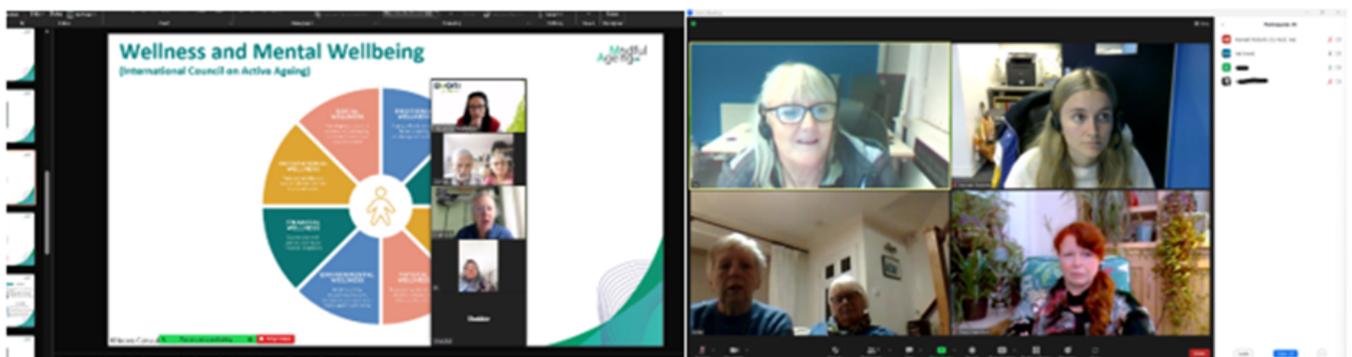
As can be seen from the evaluations and feedback, the first pilot of the Support Groups was a great success, with all respondents rating each aspect ‘excellent’. In addition, individual feedback from participants shows that they will continue to work on their wellbeing via the techniques they learnt throughout the sessions. This shows the positive impact of the sessions and all participants expressed that they were very motivated to continue to work towards their goals.

For pilot 2, 7 people participated in the Mindful Ageing Support groups, which took place online via ZOOM during November 2022 after the 2nd pilot of the Mindful Ageing bootcamps. Recruitment was from the bootcamps and also via email and social media contact with potential participants. The facilitator was Val Boulding, an experienced Community Development Tutor with extensive experience working with diverse groups. The sessions were more challenging than the first pilot due to the complex needs within the group, for example someone suffering long covid, someone with an eating disorder and 2 participants experiencing recent bereavement.

For each session, a detailed lesson plan was prepared along with a PowerPoint presentation. In week 1 the participants split into 2 rooms for the discussions and the facilitator went between the two rooms. For week 2 and 3 it was decided to stay as one large group as this seemed to work much better considering the complex needs and discussions that were taking place.

As the 2nd pilot was immediately prior to the festive period, an additional consideration for week 2 related to the extra stress we put ourselves under close to any celebrations whether religious or cultural and how these times can be quite isolating for some people. They may highlight any negative situations we are experiencing and thus require more engagement in social activities to avoid feelings of negativity and isolation. More coping strategies were introduced and “interrupters” looked at what works for each person with regards to blocking negative thoughts. The discussions included ways to destress, whether listening to music, doing exercise, going for a walk, watching a comedy or doing other relaxation activities.

The third session followed a similar structure with participants reflecting on their goals with the rest of the group. The group supported the person who was speaking and allowed them to improve their action points in order to move closer to achieving their goals. Despite the challenges, progress was made with setting goals and the evaluations for the programme were very positive. Ideas were shared for moving forward and staying positive beyond the end of the course. At least 2 of the participants committed to continue to support each other. A list of signposting organisations to support eating disorders, mental health issues and bereavement were shared with participants after the final session to offer additional support.



Evaluations were completed after each session and a final evaluation was completed in session 3 with some results shown below: -

Final Evaluation and Participants Comments - UK

Below is a selection of comments received from participants during the Support Groups in the United Kingdom:-

Pilot 1

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the group?

- *Very well motivated and tuned in with the change.*
- *Very*
- *Highly motivated as I can see positive benefits also understand that goals can be juggled based on the circumstances*

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

- *Looking forward to*
- *If it meets, ¼*
- *Very likely due to its positive benefit in sharing the experiences with each other*

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

- *Mentoring myself, motivating each other as group, giving emotional support*
- *Celebrate/ notice small successes, make goals (SMART), reduce isolated*
- *Mindfulness in day to day activities, applying focus to well being, goal setting*

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

- *Being open to more challenges to achieve more*
- *Staying positive, trying new things, goal setting*

Any further comments?

“A very well structured program with the right emphasis on mental and physical wellbeing. Small groups are another positive aspect of the program. Thus giving more time to dwell on individual issues”.

Pilot 2

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

- *It's helpful to be able to talk to other women of a similar age, to get a better understanding of what we're grappling with.*
- *Identifying areas of life and prioritising those I need to concentrate on.*
- *Tackling only small activities at a time when dealing with issues.*
- *Sharing other people's problems and means of coping.*

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

- *The importance of looking after physical, spiritual and mental well being. I'm making an effort to keep on top of the little jobs, which get ignored, but will try to tackle on a more regular basis.*
- *Not quite sure yet - too early to say.*

Any further comments?

- *The need to deal with mental health issues is becoming more recognised. We look after our physical welfare, but should think about our whole body well being.*

Photographic evidence has been obtained for both pilots in the UK both from the face to face meeting and the online meetings. Due to data protection and requests from participants, post the training, they have not been included in this report.

E- Seniors (France)

For pilot 1, all participants were over 70 and recruited from the Mindful Ageing bootcamps that took place in May 2022. The first Support Session took place face to face on the 6th July 2022 and the following 2 sessions took place online on the 13th July 2022 and 20th July 2022. The online sessions took place via ZOOM. SMART goals were set in the first session and followed up in the online sessions and the peer support methodology was implemented with participants allocated time to discuss their goals or individual issues before receiving ideas and support from their group.

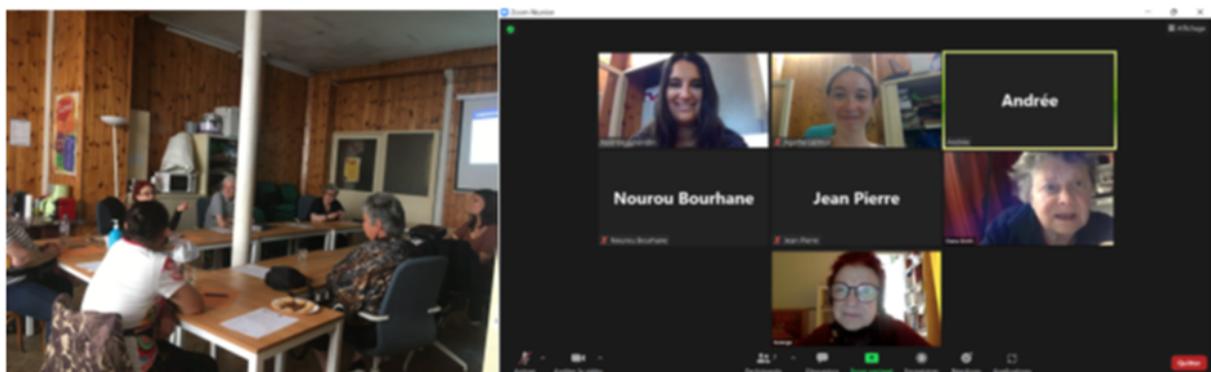
Session one was a blended format of both face to face and online. A PowerPoint presentation was used and some material was printed. The session began with an introduction on what are the support groups by the facilitators. After a round of presentation, participants played the “Pirate’s boat” ice breaking game. Then, the facilitators gave the SMART goals presentation and explained the objective of that technique. The vision board was also presented and explained, and participants were given some time to discuss and fill in the boards that facilitators had printed. Finally, participants were given time to reflect on their goals and how to achieve them. Afterwards, everyone shared the goals they had set for themselves with the rest of the group.

The second session was a blended format of both face to face and online via Zoom and telephone. A PowerPoint presentation was used and some material was sent beforehand for participants to print at home. Facilitators presented the wheel of life. Each participant had a printed wheel in front of them, and facilitators gave them a few minutes to reflect on them and fill them out. Afterwards, everyone presented their wheel, the facilitators included. Finally, a round table discussion was held where each participant had the opportunity to give an update on their objectives, and one of the new participants was able to share her own goal. The discussions were really interesting, as some participants, while trying to work on their objectives, realised maybe they were not ready for what they had wanted to achieve just yet: this was the case for participant 1, who wished to retire, and participant 2, who wanted to sell and leave her apartment. One of the participants could not attend for health reasons, so we decided to call her later that same day by telephone to make

a small bilateral session and update her on what had been said in the morning with other participants.

The final session took place face to face in Paris. The third and last session was also held face to face at E-Seniors' office in Paris. There were no presentations from the facilitators and the whole session was dedicated to discussing the objectives of each participant. Participant 1 decided to postpone her retirement by a few months, to a date that was more meaningful to her. She explained that these support group sessions allowed her to reflect and come to this decision. Participant 5 made a lot of progress towards her goal: she made two appointments with two different nutritionists in order to find one that would suit her to overcome her sugar addiction. She also helped participant 2 a lot in achieving her goal, by giving her the contact of a good acquaintance of hers who does property valuation. After these discussions, participants shared their thoughts about their experience with the support groups and said goodbye.

The 2nd pilot of the Mindful Ageing Support Groups took place during November 2022. There were 5 participants, 1 over 60 and the others 70+. The first 2 sessions were a blended format of face to face and online and the final session was face to face. The soft skills audit was conducted, and a mix of mindfulness activities and goal setting activities were introduced. Participants completed evaluations and some testimonials were also obtained.



The evaluations show that the programme was very successful and very well received by participants and contact with staff members since the Support Groups took place have also highlighted the potential for sustainability of the group as some continue to meet beyond the facilitated sessions. See extract from E-Seniors shared email: -

“Following the Support Groups in May and November 2022, the seniors who had taken part in each of these discussions and exchange groups continued to see each other informally and to communicate with each other on the subjects discussed

during the Support Groups. The seniors continued to follow the development and success of each other's projects, through frequent telephone contact or messages, and supported each other by not hesitating to meet again to discuss them face to face, in pairs or in groups. They also told us that they had been able to build new friendships, which sometimes helps them in their fight against isolation and social exclusion. Finally, the participants exchanged information on new good practices in the field of mindfulness that they had discovered on their own, for example in relation to nutrition, good quality sleep, meditation or physical health, and which could help the members of their group”.

Evaluations and Participants Comments - France

A selection of the final evaluations are shown below from the French participants of the Mindful Ageing Support Groups and show good overall feedback.

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the Group?

- Very motivated
- Motivated
- Take time to reflect and ask myself where I am in relation to my different objectives

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

- I hope soon
- Likely: it would be a pleasure
- I don't know: checking in? Calling each other?

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

- To motivate myself, gather information about good addresses, persevere
- Sharing our own limits, sharing our efforts, putting things in common
- Stop to reflect, set goals, be aware that sharing is synonymous with well-being

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

- Use the good advice
- Continue my reflection, try to be more concrete
- set goals regularly and check whether they are expected or not

Any further comments?

- 3 sessions are a bit short
- Thank you for the support

- Interesting sessions but how to continue them? Whatsapp group? Time management: 1.5 hours rather than 1 hour

Additional comments were obtained from participants:-

“It was great to be able to share ideas and make decisions together.”

“The contact with the facilitators was very good, they were wonderful listeners.”

“The word I will remember: sharing. Sharing good addresses, sharing efforts, sharing our own limits.”

“I am very grateful for these sessions, which reminded me that it is important to take time to reflect on your goals and that sharing is synonymous with well-being.” -

BICC (Bulgaria)

In Bulgaria the pilot 1 Support Groups took place as one online and 2 face to face sessions. After experiencing some delays due to the availability of the group there were longer gaps than had been planned between the first and second sessions. 5 participants, all over 50 engaged in the delivery. The sessions complemented the mindfulness element of the bootcamps and this was continued throughout. In addition to the discussions, Tai-Chi formed part of the sessions to meet the needs of this particular group. The first session took place on the 23rd May 2022 online and this was followed by 2 face to face sessions which took place on the 23rd June and 27th June 2022. Online introductory session.

The first session, introduced the project and the idea behind the support groups before asking individuals to introduce themselves. Mindfulness was re-introduced, following on discussions from the bootcamp. SMART goals were explained before participants completed a log of their goals and in particular what they wanted to work on before the next support group. The session ended with a meditation activity. The second session started with the Pirate Ship activity, where everyone had the opportunity to reflect on their goals. This was followed by the Wheel of life and the Old woman/young woman activity before the discussion round and then a short Tai chi lesson, as requested by participants.

The final session started with a deep breathing exercise before participants shared their individual progress with regards their goals. This was followed by Tai chi, further discussions and the final evaluation form.

The second pilot took place in May/June 2023 following the 2nd Mindful Ageing Bootcamp. They were facilitated by Mr Plamen Todorov and Mr Jordan Avramov (facilitator of the Bootcamp). The sessions were delivered face to face and the

participants were all female. A range of tools were used including exploration of meditation and vision boards to support SMART Goals.

The first session explored the challenges that each participant is facing and what had encouraged them to join the sessions. Personal introductions took place and ground rules were set. The “key chains” icebreaker was used along with a thinking activity. This was followed with the SMART goals activity and setting achievable goals to feedback on next time. The session evaluation was completed before a final meditation activity. The 2nd session explored achieving personal satisfaction with what drives and motivates us and how we can get a good life balance. Examining progress from the previous session looking at different emotions. Session evaluations were completed before a deep breathing exercise. The final session explored how to build a support network and how to continue to support each other beyond the sessions. The discussion round took place, followed by the “Wheel of life” exercise and the tools needed to build our own networks. Vision boards were created before the final overall evaluation and meditation session.

Facilitator comments *“Our group wanted more exercises as a result of what they learned during the Bootcamp, so we gave them two short tai-chi lessons. In between these, we had nice discussions about getting older, their attitude to mindfulness practices and their short-term goals towards leading a healthy and mindful lifestyle”.*



Evaluations and Participants Comments - Bulgaria

Evaluations show that the Mindful Ageing Support Groups were very well received by participants in Bulgaria and additional evidence is available in the partner's individual report. Additionally, In the evaluations of Pilot 2, all participants ticked in the evaluation that they would recommend the Mindful Ageing Support Groups to a friend. Samples from the final evaluation forms are given below:-

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the group?

- Definitely motivated to continue. Very useful meetings and talks which were excellently moderated by our Facilitator

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

- Very likely to continue to meet and talk on this topic
- Really looking forward to further support on this topic and new initiatives/projects in this field

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

- How to overcome personal barriers
- Thinking differently
- How to expand our personal networks

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

- SMART goals technique
- Thinking differently
- Planning for achieving my goals
- Try to socialise more and challenge my perceptions

Any further comments?

- More such meetings

VAMK (Finland)

For the first pilot of the Support sessions, all 3 sessions took place face to face at the Vaasa University of Applied Sciences. The first session took place in May 2022 and the second and third sessions took place in August 2022. The dates were arranged to meet the availability of the group during the holiday period. Mindfulness exercises continued to be used during these sessions and all participants set and worked towards their goals. In addition the peer support methodology was implemented. 5 individuals engaged and all were over the age of 50. The facilitators were VAMK's lecturers Virpi Välimaa and Helena Leppänen, both experienced in this kind of delivery.

The first session started with a breathing exercise. After this there was a presentation and participants were told about the aim and purpose of the support group. The idea was for the participants to get to know each other with the help of an icebreaker, but the presentation already worked well for this and helped create a relaxed and open atmosphere. Different perspectives were considered with the help of the picture of the Old Lady or Young Lady. Different points of view were also supposed to be considered using the empty water glass/full water glass exercise, but due to the lively discussions, this exercise was not carried out in order to leave enough time for setting goals. The setting of the goals sparked a lot of discussion and the participants took turns to talk about their goals and challenges related to ageing. Group members helped each other by asking a lot of questions, not by giving advice. The second Support Group session started with sharing about their summer time. After this, a Mindfulness exercise followed. After that, we moved outside to talk on a beautiful summer day. The realisation of the goals set by the participants were discussed and peer support offered. The participants had managed to act in line with the goals, which were too broad and it was concluded to prepare even more concrete sub goals. The day ended with a relaxation exercise.

The third session of the support group started with a Mindfulness exercise. After relaxing, the participants told their news using picture cards. The participants used the cards to describe their moods well and verbally. After the coffee, the participants looked at their time use in their current life situation with the help of a hot air balloon exercise. The exercise helped them to organise the things that fill their day and prioritise their time use. In the goal discussion, the participants told how the sub-goals they had set the previous time had been realised. The goals had been realised. The day ended again with a Mindfulness exercise.

The 2nd pilot of the Mindful Ageing Support groups took place in January 2023, and they were all delivered face to face at the Vaasa University of Applied Sciences by the same facilitators as pilot 1. There were 4 participants and all of them retired from work. The format was very similar to the first pilot with participants setting goals and engaging in mindful activities. Feedback from both pilots was very positive. The day started with a breathing exercise. After the exercise followed by a presentation. The participants were told about the aim and purpose of the support group. The idea was that the participants would get to know each other better with the help of an icebreaker and it took place in a relaxed and open atmosphere. The participants had met each other already at the Bootcamp. Different perspectives were considered with the help of the picture of the Old Lady or Young Lady. In the empty glass of water/full glass of water training, different aspects of things were also considered. The setting of the goals sparked a lot of discussion and the participants took turns to talk about their goals and challenges related to ageing. Group members helped each other by asking a lot of questions, not by giving advice. The day ended with Mindfulness exercise. The second day of the support group started with relaxation exercises. After relaxing, the participants described the situation of their goals by using picture cards. After that, we discussed sleep and the effect of breathing exercises. Although the participants had managed to act well in line with the goals, the goals had to be clarified a little and they had to be encouraged to continue in achieving the main goals. The day ended with a breathing exercise.

The third day of the support group started with a Mindfulness exercise. The participants looked at their time use in their current life situation with the help of a hot air balloon exercise. The exercise helped them to organise the things that fill their day and prioritise their time use. In the goal discussion, the participants told how the goals they had set in the previous sessions had been realised. The goals had been realised well and the bigger goals were going in the right direction. The participants also wanted more information about the amount of protein in food. With the help of For example, we practised calculating the amount of protein in daily meals. They were told about the online academy and asked about the willingness to test it. At the end of the third day, the participants gave their contact information to each other. The day ended again with a relaxing exercise.

Facilitator comments: *“The meetings were really nice, the participants were motivated and there was a warm atmosphere during the days”.*



Final Evaluations and Participants Comments - Finland

Final feedback from both pilots was very positive in Finland. Some examples are given below:-

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the group?

"I'm motivated, for my own well-being."

"Very motivated."

"Highly motivated."

"Highly motivated."

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

"Very likely."

"Quite likely."

"I'll continue."

"Very likely."

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

"Breathing exercises, removing unnecessary ballast from life."

"Relaxation, hearing about other people's problems, goal orientation."

"Deepening the importance of relaxation exercises. Adopting an attitude of acceptance, everything affects everything."

"The most important thing is the whole, all goals and progress support each other, for example exercise, nutrition, and sleep. In the meetings, we supported each other, even though the goals were different."

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

"I can not say."

"There could be an extra meeting before the start of the Support Group to discuss the well-being of the participants."

"A more concrete review of the Bootcamp phase."

"The support group is good like this, especially the relaxation exercises, as well as the leader's calm, light guidance."

Any further comments?

"The guidance and the course leaders have been competent and pleasant and knowledgeable."

"Mindful Ageing is a great experience that unfolded little by little. I got much more than I expected. The understanding of accepting presence was developing all the time. Materials, direction, group, rhythm, everything seemed to be right now."

IED (Greece)

The first pilot took place in July 2022 after delivery of the Mindful Ageing bootcamps and recruitment was mainly via the bootcamp programme. All 3 sessions were delivered online using MSTeams and there were 6 participants at each session. The facilitator was Konstantina Karathanasi who has studied sports science, with a master's degree in chronic diseases. She works particularly with vulnerable groups, especially seniors, to give them ideas and support to be more active in their daily lives. Konstantina is a yoga instructor and health professional. The main focus was for the group to set their own SMART goals and work on them between sessions. The group supported each other to look for solutions to the issues they had raised. The supportive structure within the smaller group was very effective and good feedback was received from participants and in particular the measuring of soft skills was deemed very useful. The group had 4 participants over the age of 60 and 2 over the age of 50.

The second pilot took place during March 2023 and took on a similar format as the first pilot. There were 5 participants, 2 male and 3 female. The delivery was online via MSTeams and the facilitator was Konstantina Karathanasi.

In the second session the participants shared updates on their goals after the facilitator had given them the floor. Some people found it simpler to accomplish their goals than others. In general, everyone in the group was quite positive and gave

helpful suggestions. The third session included updates from participants on their goals. Participants were glad to share that they had achieved their goals. A final meditation exercise and group discussion concluded the session. Some participants said they would communicate again.

Facilitator comments: *“The process was really good and most of the participants were very active in this pilot, which shows that the methodology and materials developed were useful for them”.*

Additional evidence can be found in the individual partner report.

Evaluations and Participants Comments - Greece

Pilot 1

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the group?

- Very much!
- I feel motivated but I must try more
- I had already set goals before sessions, now I feel I can achieve them
- Very motivated
- I feel motivated now, I will try to be like this in the future
- Very motivative sessions

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

- I don't know
- I will be happy if I do
- Not really
- No
- Not likely
- I am not sure

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support

Groups?

- Mindfulness, positivity, bodyscan
- Body care and mindfulness
- Mindful eating, mindfulness
- Set goals
- Useful practices, mindfulness
- Achieve my goals and take care of myself

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

- Good nutrition
- I am not sure yet
- Advice and tools
- Set SMART goals
- Mindfulness and SMART goals

Any further comments?

- No
- Thank you!
- No comments
- Congratulations
- No further comments
- Good groups

Pilot 2

How motivated do you feel to continue with the goals you have set yourself during the group?

1. Very motivated
2. Highly motivated
3. I am very determined to continue with the goals I have set
4. Motivated
5. Sometimes is difficult for me to feel motivated but I try my best

How likely are you to continue to meet with your support group?

1. Very likely
2. Depends on the family commitments!
3. With pleasure!
4. I am not sure
5. Not likely

What are the main three things you have learnt from taking part in the Support Groups?

1. To look after my mental and physical health using mindfulness, to think positive
2. Useful tips for my health, relaxation exercise, discussing sharing our thoughts
3. To set important goals for my wellness, think in a positive way
4. Positive attitude, sharing experiences, hearing about other people's problems

5. To motivate myself more, to take care of myself

What will you take away or implement from the sessions?

1. The advises to set goals
2. Follow SMART goals
3. Methods to setting goals, the meditation exercise
4. Sharing and discussing, the meditation exercise
5. SMART goals and group discussions

Any further comments?

1. No
2. It would be nice if we had some more time to elaborate more on certain issues....but all in all very satisfied from the sessions thank you!
3. Well-organised activities
4. No
5. Thank you for the beautiful experience!

Impact of the Mindful Ageing Support Groups

The positive impact of the Mindful Ageing Support groups can be seen clearly from the participants' feedback, facilitator comments and the positive reporting from partners. The individual partner reports for each pilot highlight many of the positive outcomes and results and show that this intervention can be facilitated face to face or online with equal success. The methodology used, giving participants an allocated time spot, to address their own issues, supported confidence building and reassessing of health needs. Individual action plans encouraged individuals to set realistic SMART goals to improve areas of physical, mental, emotional, and social health. Increasing social networks was a key area for discussion and for individuals to work on. Post Covid, many of the target group were still feeling isolated. Sharing thoughts and ideas on how to make positive changes was seen as very important and ideas around social engagement, learning and volunteering opportunities were shared along with the sharing of key contact organisations for those looking to access other services. This itself is seen as a positive impact as can lead to earlier interventions for supporting specific needs in later life.

Facilitator comments highlight additional positive outcomes and impact from the Mindful Ageing Support Groups. One facilitator commented: -

“It is difficult to say whether the group will maintain contact with each other as for most of them they are currently in survival mode with their own issues. However many suggestions and ideas on resilience, surviving difficult times and just generally staying well were shared. Some of them may access the different support groups that were shared and they will also be contacted for the future multiplier event and also other relevant training. They also shared in chat ideas for other online groups, including yoga, zumba and other health related interventions. In the final session the group were introduced to the online platform which can provide them with additional support, going forward”.

MINDFULNESS AUDIT

As part of the training in all countries, participants completed a 'Mindfulness Audit' which helped them to self-assess their skills and attitudes related to mindful living and active ageing. Participants evaluated themselves at the beginning of the Bootcamps (IO2) and again at the end of the Bootcamps/start of the Support Groups (for those who attended both parts of the programme) and again at the end of the Support Groups.

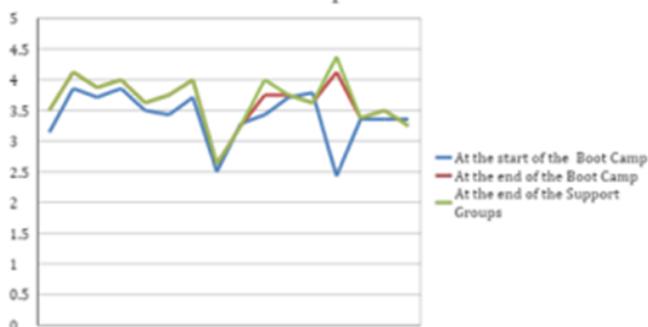
A summary of the participants' results in each country are shown below.

BICC- Bulgaria

BICC

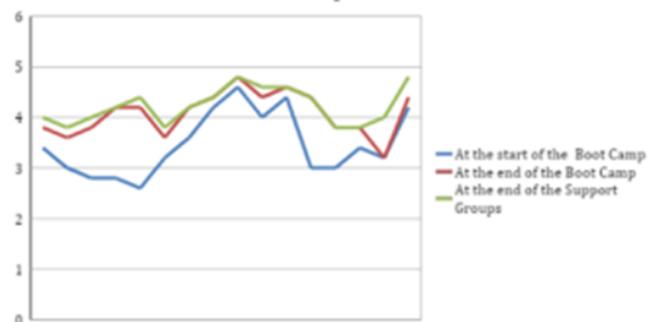
Pilot 1

At the start of the Boot Camp, At the end of the Boot Camp and At the end of the Support Groups



Pilot 2

At the start of the Boot Camp, At the end of the Boot Camp and At the end of the Support Groups



Generally, participants stated that they were able to acquire a better understanding and sense of the importance of mindfulness by the end of the Boot camp as compared to when they started. In addition, their knowledge of mindfulness and related tools/strategies improved further by the end of the support group sessions. Data shows that participants felt that the peer support throughout the program was significantly beneficial to them when setting personal Mindfulness/Active ageing goals. Most participants also expressed an increased motivation to incorporate the learned mindfulness and goal-setting techniques within their lifestyle, upon completing the sessions.

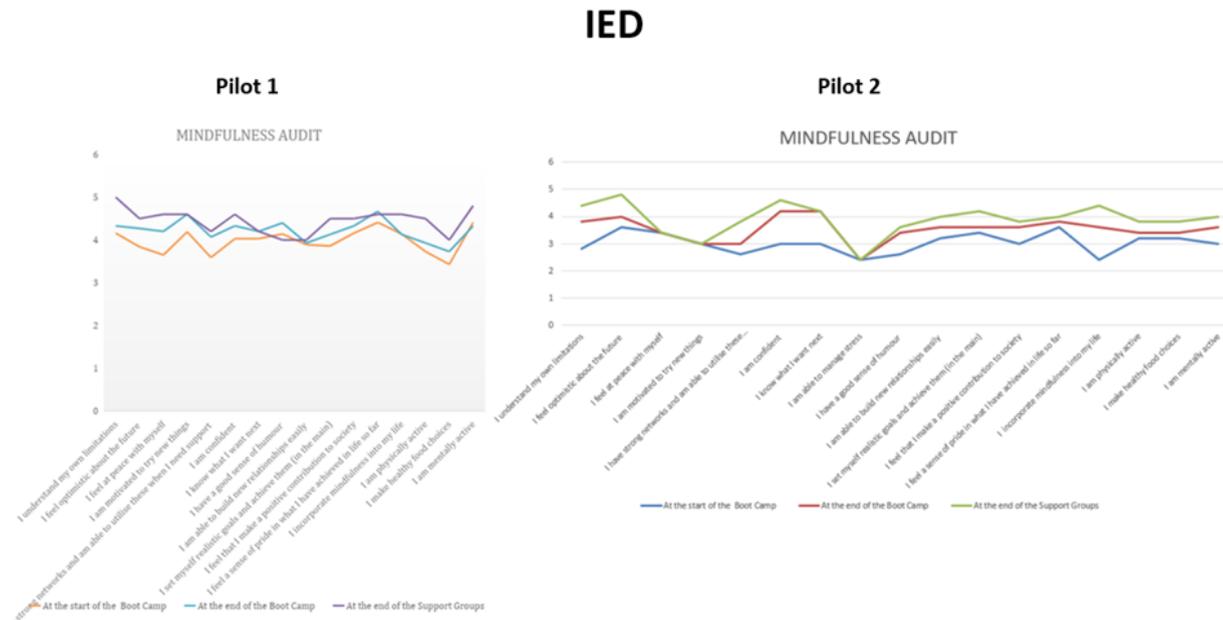
E-Seniors - France

E-Seniors



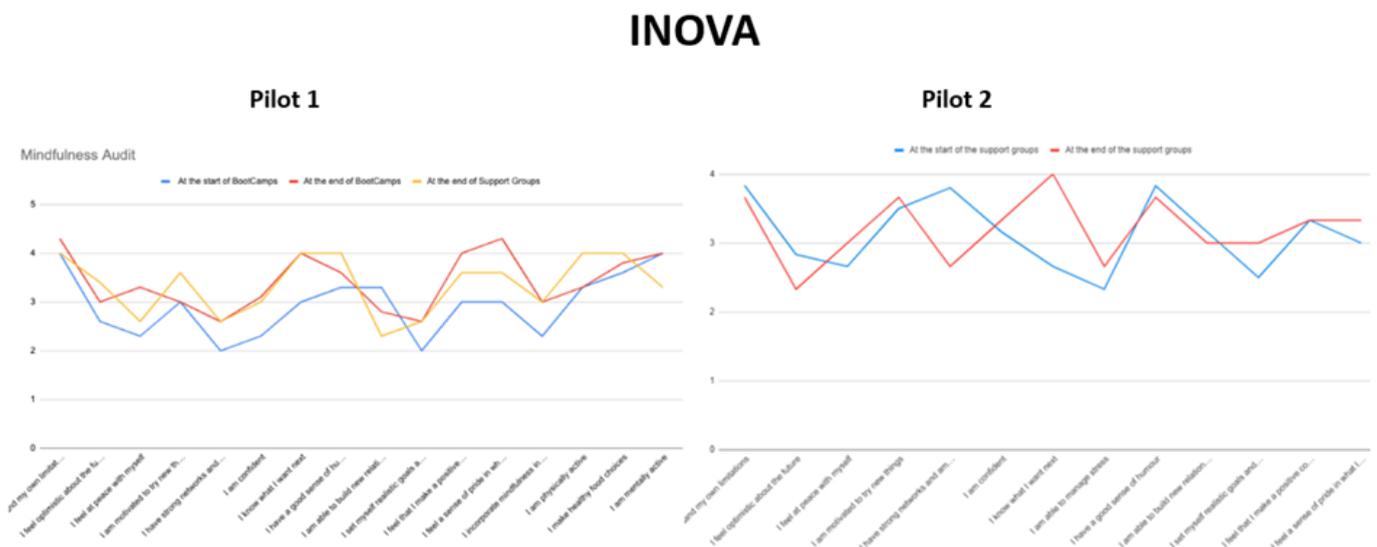
In general, participants showed an increased understanding of mindfulness and an increased willingness to use mindfulness tools outside of the sessions in their personal lives. Participants expressed feeling more at peace with themselves by the end of the bootcamp. Data also shows a significant rise in participants' confidence levels by the end of the bootcamp and support sessions. Moreover, participants reported feeling more physically and mentally active as well as motivated to try new things, by the end of their involvement with the program. Most participants felt that by the end of the boot camp and support session, they were able to build new relationships easily and felt better about their social skills.

IED - Greece



Overall, participants showed an improvement in their confidence levels by the end of the bootcamp and support sessions. Participants also expressed feeling more able to set themselves realistic goals. They showed increased levels of motivation to achieve their goals, by the end of the program. The data highlights that participants left feeling better equipped and positioned to make a positive contribution to society. Overall, participants showed an increase in optimism for the future, by the end of the boot camp and support sessions, with a significant proportion stating they would recommend the program to a friend.

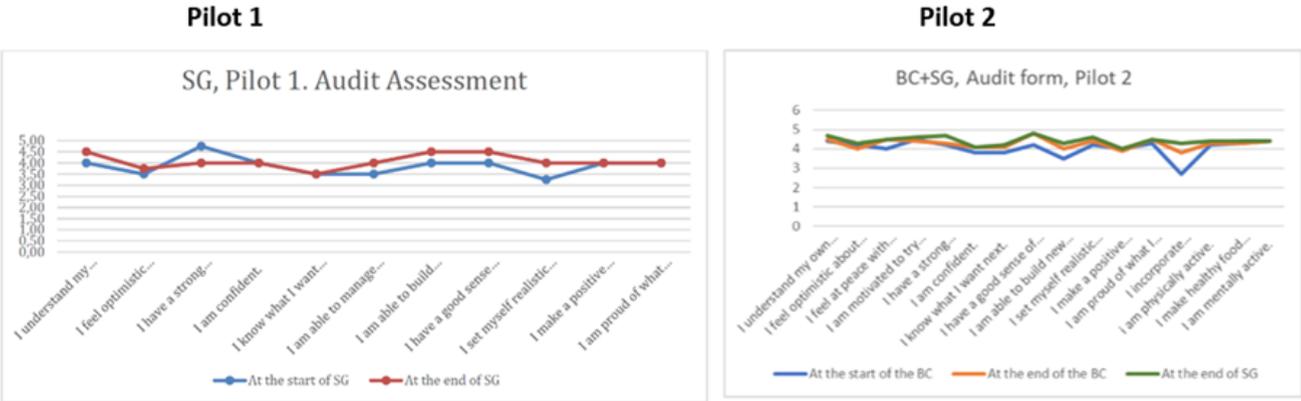
Inova - United Kingdom



Broadly, participants showed boosted confidence levels by the end of the bootcamps and support sessions, with a majority finding the support sessions particularly beneficial for helping them identify and understand their limitations. Most participants reported feeling a higher sense of pride in what they'd accomplished, by the end of the bootcamp. Participants felt better able to make healthy food choices and better equipped to identify neglected areas of their health. They showed an improved understanding of their future aims, priorities, and needs, by the end of their participation in the support groups. Moreover, participants showed that the support sessions helped them significantly improve their stress management abilities.

VAMK - Finland

VAMK



Generally, participants showed an improved understanding of goal-setting and mindfulness techniques with a majority expressing a strong desire to implement such techniques in the future. The data also shows that participants felt more confident and highly motivated to step outside their comfort zone, by the end of the bootcamp and support sessions. All participants expressed that they would recommend the support groups to a friend and showed a desire to continue meeting up with their support group in the future. By the end, participants felt more reassured about their networks being strong. They expressed feeling more empowered to use their networks to garner support when needed.

All data consistently indicates Bootcamps and Support Group sessions being impactful, as can be seen by participants showing improved levels of confidence, motivation, optimism, and understanding of mindfulness by the end of their involvement. All around, participants expressed feeling more physically and mentally active because of their participation. The support sessions consistently proved

socially and emotionally beneficial for participants as they expressed being better able to build new relationships easily. In a comparison of all the figures, participants throughout the different countries expressed that they would recommend the program and showed significant interest in attending more such events in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The piloting of the Mindful Ageing Support Groups proved a great success. Across both pilots, the consortium engaged with a total of 52 participants, all over 50 with quite a few over the age of 70. A range of diverse challenges and issues were discussed in the peer groups. Partners liaised with their participants before deciding the best approach to the Support Groups with some taking place face to face and some online. Hosting the Support Groups online allowed for geographical boundaries to be extended and were inclusive of those people feeling isolated and not wanting to leave their homes for training. The blended approach appeared to work well with a mix of online and face to face delivery of the groups. Participant evaluations and further evidence can be found in the individual partner reports for IO3.

Many of the Mindful Ageing Support Group participants have shown interest in attending future training as well as wanting to recommend the Bootcamps and the Support Groups to others. The Support Groups address the specific needs of individual participants. Feedback from the participants shows that they have benefitted in numerous ways from attending the Support Groups. Some participants have set up their own networks to maintain contact, and to continue to support each other. Others are now attending or accessing other activities in their communities and some have been signposted to specific support groups based on their individual needs. It was decided to do this on a more informal basis as the original plan had been to train 2 participants from each group to continue with the Support Groups long term. In view of some complex issues brought to the groups, e.g bereavement, eating disorders and long term illness it was agreed that it would not be appropriate to ask a participant to manage these situations as all called for an experienced facilitator to lead and guide the group.

Participants Evaluation Forms completed for pilot 1 and pilot 2 show that Mindful Ageing Support Groups not only work well but there is also demand for this kind of intervention. Feedback from pilot 1, informed further development of pilot 2 Support Groups and ensured that learner suggestions and comments were valued. Face to face delivery is possibly the best option for the Support Sessions considering the topics that may be discussed (for example, bereavement and long-term illness). However, it should also be considered that some people feeling isolated may not have the social confidence to attend a group in person and that therefore, in some situations, online delivery is preferred. A mix of online and face to face seems to have worked well for some partners and a good option, going forward.

Additional comment from a participant:

“I very much appreciate it being on zoom - I feel very uncomfortable in closed rooms. I'm quite reflective so I have a lot to think about and process. I'm full of admiration for the other women in the group and their ability to be supportive and kind to everyone else in the group”.

Evaluations show that all participants benefited from working in the smaller groups, sharing their challenges, setting individual goals and supporting each other. Some of them had similar challenges, whilst some of the challenges were unique to the individual. All of them were able to map their journeys and benefit from suggestions and support from peers. The approach was very informative, welcoming and non judgemental and the key word was “support” - it was not about advice giving. Setting a group agreement helped with setting boundaries and this is recommended for any future delivery of the sessions. It is clear from research and from the programme that more can be done to ensure individuals approach retirement or later life without losing their sense of identity, social contacts or their confidence. It also became clear during the programme that Covid has had a negative impact on this age group and that rebuilding social networks is a challenge for many of them.

A key recommendation would be to continue to promote Support Group with older learners and with stakeholders and organisations that can offer additional support. A consideration, going forward, may be to ensure clarity is given regarding the content at the recruitment stage. The word “Support” may lead some participants to envisage a ‘counselling’ type session and as it is likely that some older people have to overcome many issues, including loss of a loved one, whether a parent, partner, child or close friend, it is clear that the support groups can offer comfort but not counselling. Many of the participants were managing a range of health issues that come with the ageing process. If leaving the title as “Support Groups” it is important to ensure there is clarity from the beginning, to avoid the counselling dimension overtaking the session. Ensure facilitators are experienced to deal with difficult discussions should they arise and preparing a list of signposting organisations can also be useful.

It has been interesting and useful to have feedback from both the online and face to face delivery of the Mindful Ageing Support groups as this can influence future decisions on best practice.

Quote from Inova (UK) participant:

Inova, with the help of EU funding, has guided and encouraged me in important ways during the last couple of years.

The Mindful Ageing Support Groups were very well received and feedback shows that there is scope for further delivery going forward and there could be in great demand in the future. It is recommended where possible to encourage participants to set new dates to meet and for their own Mindful Ageing Support groups. However there is a risk in having an inexperienced facilitator due to the issues that may be raised in the sessions. Although face to face is possibly the preferred option for the training, online delivery does allow more vulnerable participants to engage, whether they are isolated geographically or due to lack of confidence or health conditions. It is clear from the data, that it is much easier to engage women in this kind of learning. A consideration going forward would be to look at how more men's groups could be engaged in a similar project and whether men-only sessions could be an option as it seems generally the male ageing population may feel less able to voice their issues.

In total 52 participants engaged in the Mindful Ageing Support Group programme and it was delivered in 5 partner countries, United Kingdom, France, Greece, Finland and Bulgaria. Some of the delivery was online and some was face to face. Feedback shows differing perspectives from partners with regards to the best option for delivery. E.g BICC suggests that the delivery should always aim to be face to face now that Covid lockdowns are over. However, Inova Consultancy suggests that online should not be dismissed for its power to reach many of those who feel isolated at home, with health or confidence issues, care duties or other, may struggle to attend in person. It is recommended that online delivery should remain a viable option and that where possible combining to have face to face and online may work in some situations. Ensuring the needs of participants are met should be the main focus and encouraging participants to exchange contact details for ongoing support after the programme ends should also be encouraged.

The Mindful Ageing programme has committed to promoting positive ageing as highlighted in the IO2 Mindful Ageing Bootcamps. In doing so it addresses isolation, looking for solutions and improved well being for the over 50s. The Support Groups have continued with this remit and the findings within this report will continue to have positive effects as the message is spread and the ideas from Mindful Ageing are cascaded to other communities.

In conclusion, the Mindful Ageing Support groups have been very successful for their ability to address isolation for the over 50s and encourage them to be more engaged in their communities and in mindful activities. A mix of blended learning appears to be the best approach for the Support Groups and liaising with learners prior to delivery and involving them in the planning is good practice.

Partners

COORDINATOR

Inova Consultancy (United Kingdom)

<https://www.inovaconsult.com/>



IED-Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (Greece)

<https://ied.eu/>



E-Seniors (France)

<https://www.eseniors.eu/>



CCS (Ireland)

<https://ccseducation.com/>



VAMK (Finland)

<https://www.vamk.fi/fi/>



BICC-Business Information and Consulting Centre

(Bulgaria)

<https://www.bicc-sandanski.org/>



The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.