

Thinking Space Paper No.38

Reducing self-doubts of NEETs

Dunja Buchhaupt, KIZ Sinnova, 2020

The lack of self-confidence is destructive for NEETs and (re-)gaining it can be difficult, especially for those who have faced major setbacks in their lives. If young people do not believe in themselves and their own potential, it will be far more difficult to integrate them into the labour market. The good news is that NEETs can work on themselves to reduce self-doubts. This paper shares some best practices and ideas on how to support NEETs to gain trust in themselves and self-respect.

Often, self-doubts are sub-conscious and originate from early childhood, seeping into adulthood and professional life. Self-doubts prevent young people from applying for a job, starting an internship or taking the entrepreneurial plunge – therefore, it is important to integrate modules that work on strengthening self-respect in NEETs programmes. Sharing self-doubts boldly requires a certain level of trust and feeling of ease between participants and coaches. Trust is key to be willing to pin down internal conflicts. Nevertheless, coaches should address self-doubts from the beginning of a program. For example, they can help the NEETs to cultivate gratitude by keeping a gratitude journal in which they write down what they are grateful for on a daily or weekly basis. Gratitude practices may seem basic and simple, but it helps the beneficiaries to affirm that there are good things in their lives. This does not mean that life is perfect; it does not ignore all burdens and hassles in their lives. However, gratitude journals encourage identifying some amount of goodness in their lives. Moreover, NEETs start to acknowledge positive traits in themselves but at the same time learn to appreciate the support and love of other people around them.

In this paper we like to share favourite practices of KIZ coaches and program participants that helped NEETs to quiet down self-doubts or learn how to deal with them. Being able to cope with anxiety and self-concerns is no guarantee for finding a job at the end of the program – but it is a skill that is useful far beyond the professional level.

- **Accept your insecurities** – Young people often feel alone with negative thoughts and emotions. They haven't learned to deal with negative emotions or drawbacks and this makes them feel ashamed and isolated. A first step to change the attitude toward self-doubts is the realization: Doubting yourself is normal. Everyone battles negative voices and feels insecure sometimes. The simple realization that self-doubt is part of the human experience helps people embrace it and find ways to control it. The main goal should not be to eliminate self-doubts but to stop oneself from overdosing with these emotions.

Therefore, coaches should try to have conversations around self-doubts and insecurities with their beneficiaries. It helps to be approachable and share own experiences. Participants should feel comfortable sharing inner conflicts. Especially in a NEET context, it is important to talk about self-doubts and negative emotions after a negative job interview or being criticized at work. Other target groups such as women may also require emotional support e.g. related to combining work with family life.

- **Change your point of view** – Doubting is not all bad. Doubt, anxiety and fear help us to stay away from dangerous situations and have been an important part of human survival in the past. Nowadays, the secret is to keep it down to a healthy level. Rather than treating doubts as an enemy, they can also be seen as an opportunity to look inward, reflect and constantly improve one's attitude and skills. Every

time you doubt, you question yourself. What do I do? What could I have done better? This gives NEETs the chance to improve: "Tomorrow I want to do it differently; I want to do it better."

Coaches can help NEETs to look at self-doubts differently. For example, a NEET did not get a job because of a lack of a specific skill. Rather than letting negative feelings of rejection grow and manifest in self-doubt and perceptions of worthlessness, the NEET can use this situation to his own advantage, invest in the development of a new skill, and apply again or in a different place afterwards.

Finding opportunities in the challenging circumstances (many NEETs live in areas with high youth unemployment rates, violence, drugs etc.) is not at all obvious. Coaches need to consider carefully the individual circumstances and backgrounds, before working on attitude, behaviour or skills. Some NEETs might be highly motivated and prepared but limited by the current economic situation. Here, the approach could be to work on creative alternatives, such as starting or involving NEETs in social enterprises, cooperatives or develop a community approach.

- **Find your optimal balance** – For self-doubts to decrease, it is important to find a balance between doubting and doing. If NEETs notice that the doubts become too mighty, remembering similar situations from the past can be helpful. Until now, they somehow always managed to move forward, it somehow always worked.¹

Coaches can ask questions to provide useful guidance when doubts become too powerful. This exercise gives NEETs the possibility to feel their emotions. Helpful questions could be: What exactly are you afraid of? Is it the possible interview rejection? The fear of not passing the final exam to finish school? Perhaps the fear is not even theirs, but something reflected on them by family, community or culture. Drilling down the root cause helps to understand certain patterns or negative affirmations. Each NEET should learn to find a balance between (reasonable) doubting and the boldness of doing.

- **Accept compliments** – People tend to remember every critique or rejection. Yet they struggle to accept compliments. Genuine compliments often emphasize the strengths, unique skills and talents of someone and can help to see the good in one's self. The ability to accept compliments is essential to overcome self-defeating thoughts and to start respecting and believe in oneself.

Coaches should teach their NEETs to better accept compliments. This is challenging in the beginning but highly rewarding once practiced. Some coaches' use a journal where the participants can collect all the compliments they have received during the program. Especially in difficult moments, it is of great value to skim the pages and be remembered of own capabilities and self-worth. The re-reading of received compliments makes it harder for self-destructive thoughts to gain power and to hinder people to move forward.

Self-doubts are familiar to most of us and can rapidly grow with rejections, failures and in difficult circumstances. Especially young people trying to find a job – regardless of their education, gender, the underlying economic situation or cultural background – may face rejections, disappointments and harsh criticism. Therefore, they need to learn that self-doubt and anxiety are normal human emotions that can actually be useful and balanced out. Talking about self-doubts and anxieties is the first step to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

¹ Strengthening self-confidence only works up to a certain degree. In case of backgrounds of drug abuse, violence, gang crimes and mental illness it is difficult to say: "It somehow always worked." Coaches cannot handle such issues in labour market integration programs and we recommend the involvement of specialists.