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**Psicocap+**

**psyche**

geestelijk gezond Vlaanderen

## bringing compagnons together

how we support, co-create and spread  
Open Dialogue practice in Flanders, Belgium

Dag Van Wetter, vzw Psyche  
JEHPsy, UCharleroi 26 September 2025



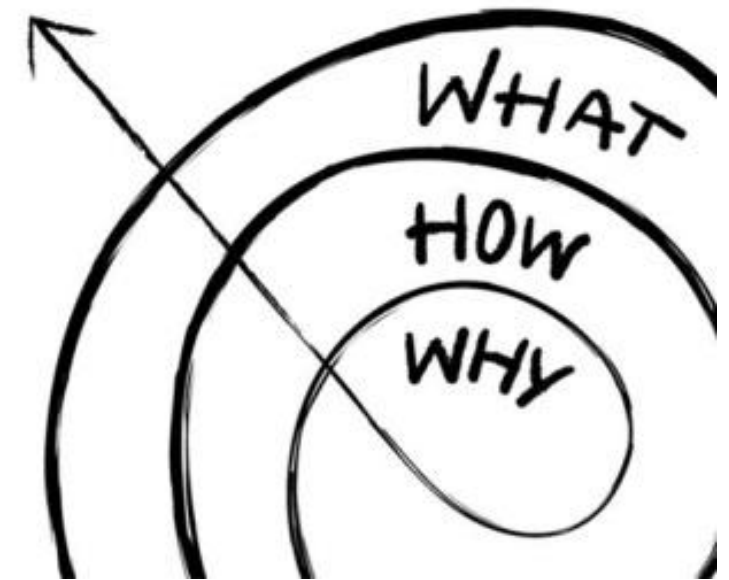
## start with why...

1) **why** are we doing this, why are we working together on this?  
the values, our own motives, others' needs and hopes?

*- important to keep on remembering ourselves & each other of this /  
to keep on this discussing and re-visiting this -*

2) **how** can we do this differently, together?  
main principles? our own commitment, participation of others?

3) **what** can we do to make a difference, again and again  
without routine – our own active contribution to the change?  
*repeating ourselves > < doing it all over again, together*



(Simon Sinek, 2011)





# start with why – “herbronnen”

‘why’ (Flemish ‘waarvoor’) also means *what for - for whom - with whom*

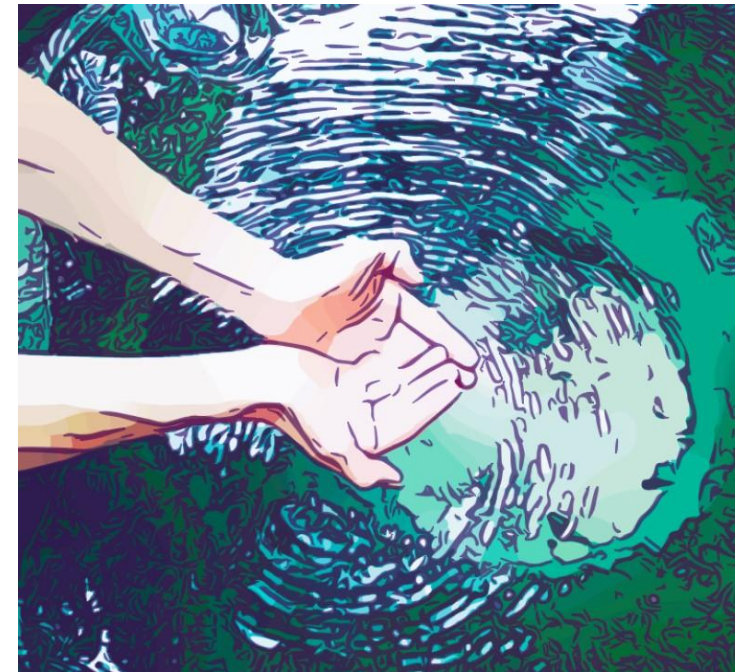
Flemish woord **‘herbronnen’** – *verb referring to this process of ‘re-visiting on the why’, which literally means: to re-source – to return to the source, going back - all over again - to the place where something freshly springs from*

- since 2010 national reform of the mental health care system in Belgium (Art. 107), mainly a **top-down process** between mental health care organisations
- at the same time some stronger, more vigorous **bottom-up movements** between professionals across organisations/teams & people with lived/family experience

*“if we really want to **learn to work differently**, then let's do this **together**”*

*“we can be **experts without stumbling over our expertise**”  
(first listen, then just carefully reach into our backpacks)*

*“daring to **turn the system inside-out**, from within, daring to **change ourselves**”*





# start with why – bringing companions together

- patient participation & family participation: **who participates with whom?**
- **we are also active participants**, seeking to connect, give support to and learn from each person involved

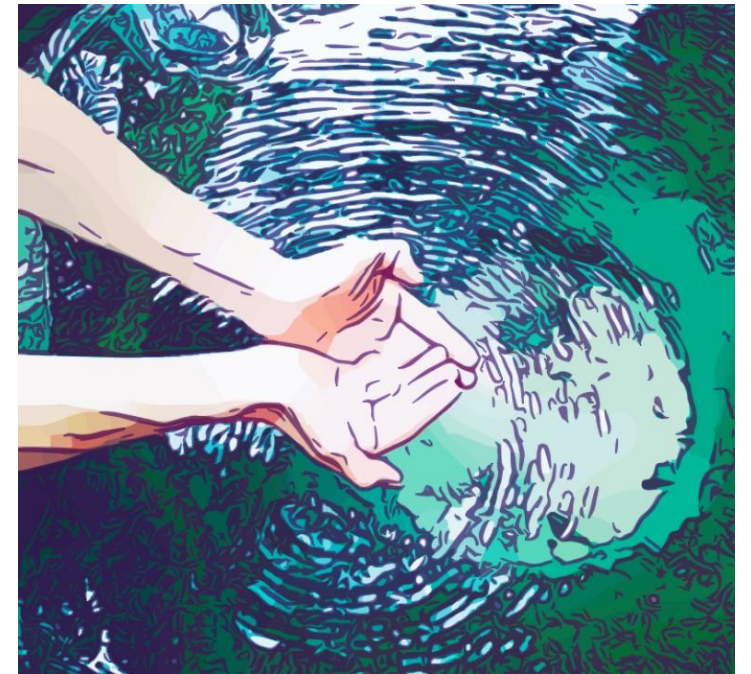
*"and how are you doing now? what brought us together here?"*

*seeking to listen to everyone, including family and others involved, doesn't violate professional secrecy*

*"The purpose of a first meeting is to meet each other – and be able to have a next meeting.  
There's always a next time possible."*

- how can we be **companions to each other?** ('compagnons' in Flemish, with a slightly broader meaning)

- > who is also involved in the story? who is also overwhelmed by the situation?  
who else can be helpful? **who can we also involve and support?**
- > how can we be **supportive** as companions?
- > who are **your** companions?
- > who are **our** companions?
- > are there **any other** companions we could involve?





meeting inspiring  
practices that seem to  
work well elsewhere

what we can learn from Finnish companions...

Open Dialogue

**Guiding Principles of the  
Open Dialogue Approach:**

1. IMMEDIATE HELP
2. FAMILY / SOCIAL NETWORK  
PERSPECTIVE
3. FLEXIBILITY AND MOBILITY
4. RESPONSIBILITY
5. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUITY
6. TOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY
7. DIALOGUE (& POLYPHONY)



## 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

a way of organising  
services

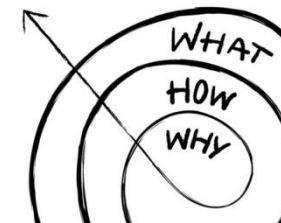


1. immediate help
2. social network perspective
3. flexibility and mobility
4. responsibility
5. psychological continuity

a way of being with  
people



1. tolerance of uncertainty
2. dialogism and polyphony







# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

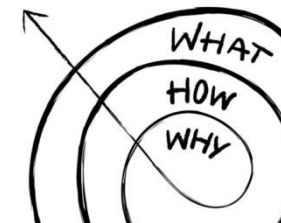
a way of organising  
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1. immediate help
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immediate response:  
connecting with the person and support system  
the help for the person and support system  
(family, friends, professionals, ...)  
must be readily available

a crisis is overwhelming for everyone involved  
and also a chance, turning point - signal or trigger  
to regain hold on the situation





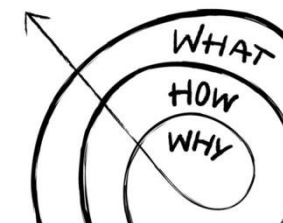
# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

a way of organising  
services



1. immediate help
2. social network perspective
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from the very first moment,  
**connecting and supporting everyone**  
who were actually already involved in the situation  
  
both the personal and the professional network,  
however small this network may be at present  
  
not the 'identified patient' is the focus,  
but the resources and relationships







# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

a way of organising  
services



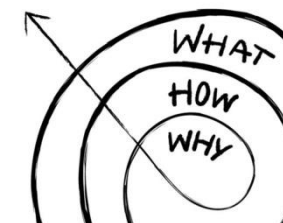
1. immediate help
2. social network perspective
3. flexibility and mobility
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the duration, place and content  
of the support and treatment  
is attuned to people's own needs

time and space to listen to everyone

not repeating ourselves or falling into routine,  
but again and again giving everything a chance

letting go of fixed structures and habits





# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

a way of organising  
services



1. immediate help
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the first contacted professional/team  
takes the responsibility for  
organising the first meeting

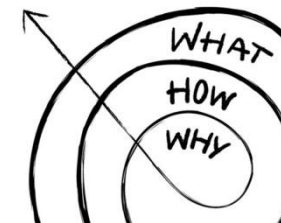
not:

'this is not for us' (send someone from pillar to post)

but:

'what can we do, who can we connect with'

by involving others, it becomes a shared responsibility





# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

a way of organising  
services

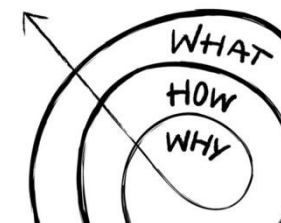
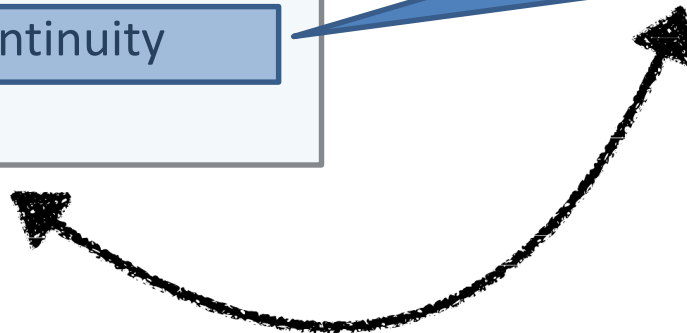


1. immediate help
2. social network perspective
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focus on the necessary continuity  
experienced by the people themselves:  
professionals support everyone in connecting every step  
**as few faltering transitions as possible**  
**from one setting/service to another**

keeping cooperation and connection  
across teams

providing the time needed - **there's always a next time**







## 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

**not knowing – not taking over  
no pre-conceived therapeutic plan**  
professionals are not in charge of the process,  
but ensure that there is room for  
**dialogue and carrying the situation together**

**together building the safety  
that the person, family and close relatives  
are not left alone, that everyone is heard**

taking care that everyone can go on,  
until the next time we meet

a way of being with  
people



1. tolerance of uncertainty
2. dialogism and polyphony





# 7 Open Dialogue principles: two key aspects to Open Dialogue practice

the purpose is not to identify the problem  
but the meaning of the situation  
solution' or 'perspectives' come from the dialogue,  
not directly from the treatment plan

every dialogue, every encounter is different  
- from person to person

'open' to all participants:  
everyone who can contribute

'open' to all content:  
all opinions (voices) are heard  
also professionals can openly disagree,  
transparently reflect on what they heard/thought/felt

the 'horizontal' dialogue between people at the  
same time becomes a 'vertical' inner dialogue

a way of being with  
people



1. tolerance of uncertainty
2. dialogism and polyphony

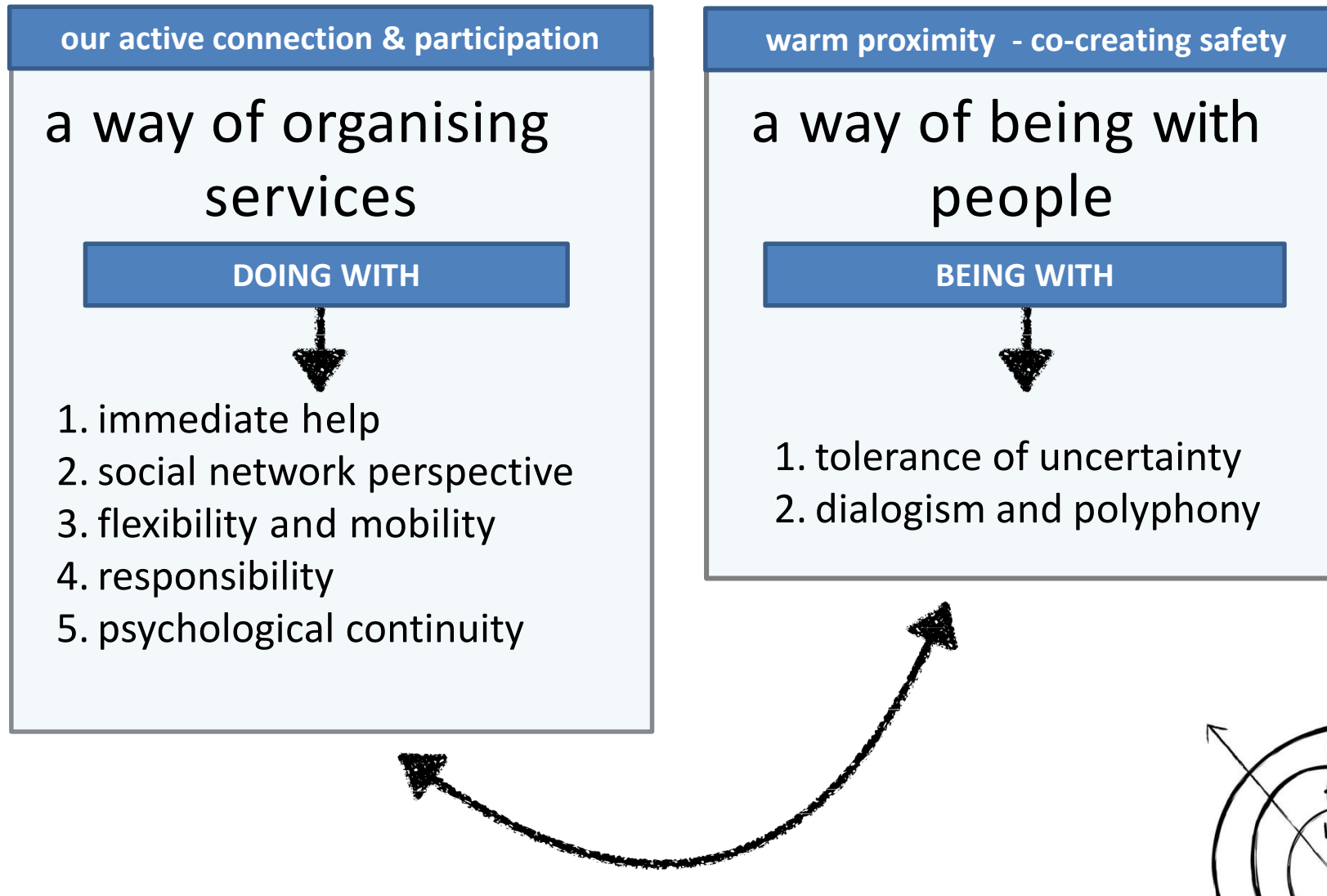




“For the word (and consequently for the human being)  
there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response”

Mikhail Bakhtin

“What is and can’t be, hurts so much” (a peer worker)







# common thread: Open Dialogue meetings

**everyone can be invited, attuned to the person himself/herself**

(who can be helpful in this meeting? who is also involved? who is also overwhelmed by the situation?)

**an Open Dialogue meeting is facilitated/supported by 2 facilitators**

- **who help everyone to listen to everyone**

(bv. *“what is the history of the idea of this meeting?” – “what can we talk about?” – “how would you like to use this meeting?”*)

**and therefore first giving everyone the chance and time to speak individually**

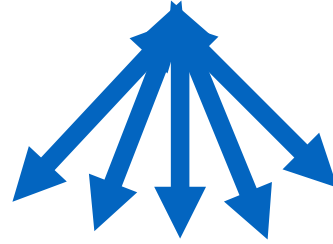
(*asking further by returning words/piece of last sentence – literally, not interpreting or paraphrasing!  
– staying with their own words and experience, making connection with where they are, here-&-now*)

- **who afterwards encourage the dialogue** (*“everything seems important – where can we start?”*)  
both a ‘horizontal dialogue’ (between people) and ‘vertical’ (internal)  
(how to make any absentees present?)
- **who themselves build in short reflection(s) - while looking at each other and participants listening on what they have heard, thought and felt** (their own internal dialogue)
- **who ask the network to react to this**
- **who help to conclude and look ahead**  
also **concrete plans** on what everyone needs or can do, until the next time

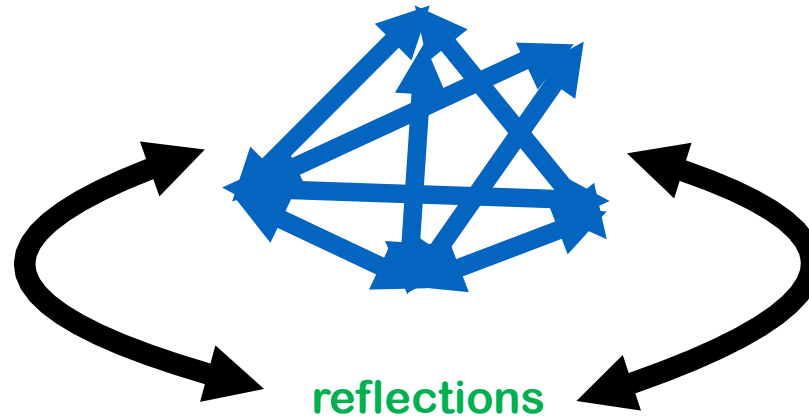
# Open Dialogue meetings

welcome   sitting   introductions   timing   introduce reflections?

what is the history of the idea of this meeting?  
how are you now? how can we use this time?



all topics seem important – where can we start?



something else?   decisions?  
safety?   next steps?   next meeting - who and when - meantime?







# on the road with Open Dialogue

- learning process through setting up different innovative projects, always starting from a **triadic network** (people with lived experience – family experience – professionals)
- meeting & studying **inspiring practices that seem to work well elsewhere**, like Open Dialogue ...
- **2016 & 2017** organising **two Open Dialogue conferences** in North-West-Flanders (Bruges area), first in Belgium international OD pioneers exchanging with professionals & people with lived/family experience
- **2017** getting the ball rolling - **priority to the development of Open Dialogue practices**
  - “the best way to start something, is just to begin -- and bring people together”*
  - **what could be a possible next step?** - *instead of waiting until everything is well arranged and we feel ready, what can we already start doing differently next time?*
  - you can't be a companion on your own – **who do you want to involve?**
  - **again and again, from each situation and with as many joint forces as possible, continue learning** to live up to the Open Dialogue principles – and what 's further needed



# on the road with Open Dialogue

## 2018-2019 building alliances

- Open Dialogue SWOT Analysis and OD Commitment Day together with managers, psychiatrists, policy-makers
- National Conference on Mental Health Care Reform, with also focus on Open Dialogue
- Flemish Open Minds Award for our first Open Dialogue projects,  
*as "a sustainable innovation towards better mental health care and with meaningful support for each other"*
- continuing international exchanges, inspirations and encouragements
- ...



# on the road with Open Dialogue

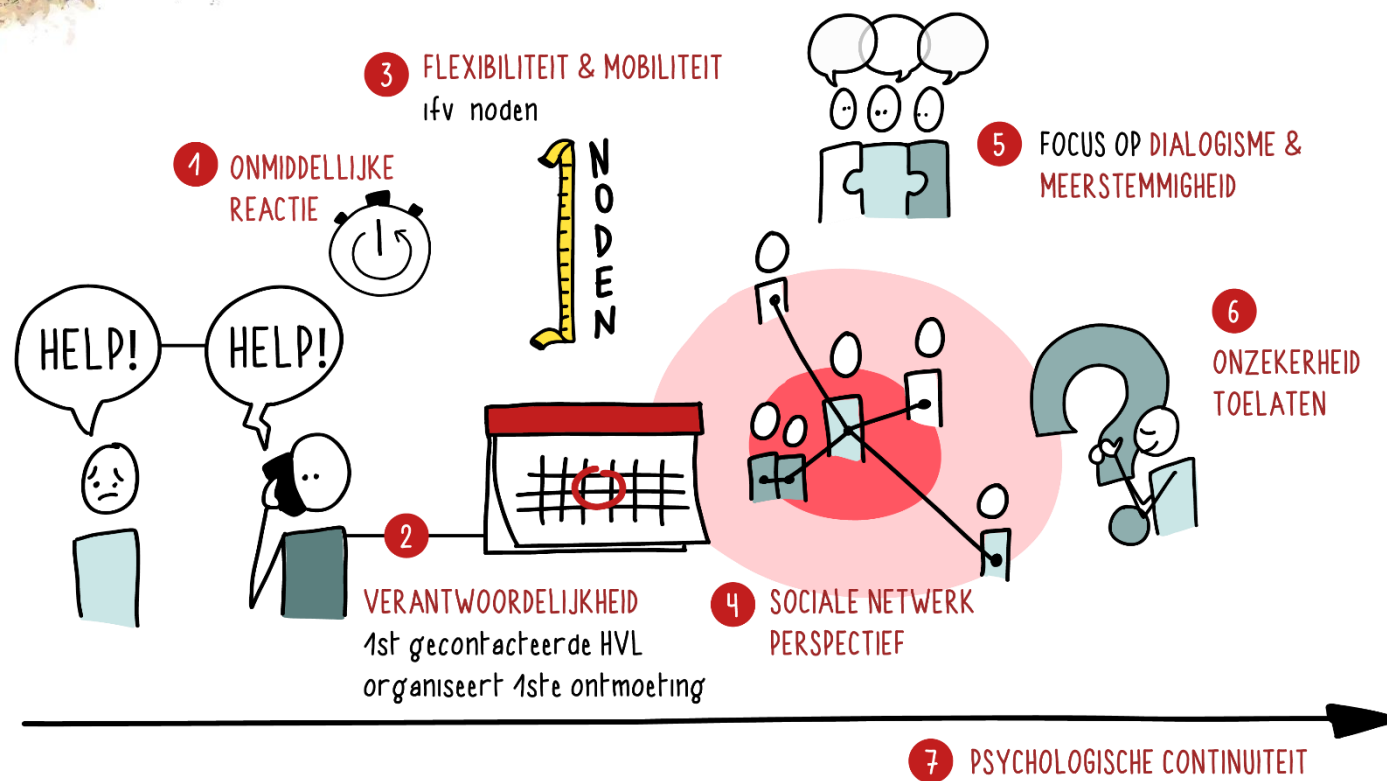
since 2020, from vzw Psyche (the Flemish Focal Point Mental Health)  
supporting the development of Open Dialogue practice, spread throughout regions and teams

- active support in preparation, cooperation and co-facilitating of Open Dialogue meetings
- Open Dialogue foundation trainings – introductions - co-creation sessions - intervision – supervision - ...
- with people from >70 teams in Flanders - bringing people together to explore & co-create Open Dialogue practice
- 2021-2025 co-organising & coördinating official Open Dialogue foundation trainings in Flanders (5x in 4 years)
- bringing together different organisations and stakeholders – developing shared responsibility for training and practice
- each time 2 Mental Health organisations bringing in 17-20 participants + 10 from other Flemish organisations/regions
- each Open Dialogue foundation training leads to the next one – 2026 is already planned
- 2025-2026 happening now: regional workshops + 2 extra OD foundation trainings asked and funded by the Belgian government  
*“to offer people who are in crisis or are facing mental health challenges, a new kind of start”*
- so all together, bottom-up & top down... 8 Open Dialogue foundation trainings in 5 years time, in this small, modest Flemish community
- continuous needs for investing in exchange and co-creation on practice/training/research – regional & international networks





# on the road with Open Dialogue



# El Camino Bekegem – a spin-off of our Open Dialogue adventures



El Camino Bekegem  
arose from Open Dialogue meetings with a family

El Camino Bekegem is a **meeting place**,  
where people gather  
around sensitivity for psychosis



in a monthly **OPEN KRING (OPEN CIRCLE)**  
people with lived experience, people with family experience, friends, professionals, ...  
together sharing about sensitivity for psychosis and life

trusting in being with & doing with, multi-expertise, polyphony, reflection, tolerating uncertainty, ...  
if we bring people together, people start to listen, share  
and are able to go ahead, re-connected

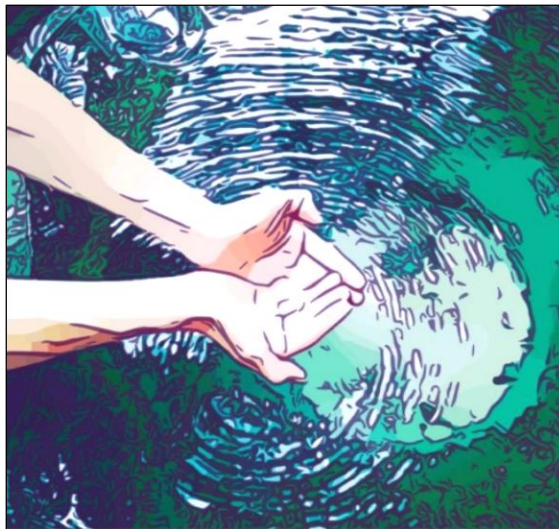
on our way building a **SOTERIA HOUSE**,  
a temporary stay for people in a psychotic crisis  
[www.elcaminobekegem/soteria](http://www.elcaminobekegem/soteria) - now part of the policy plan of the new Flemish government







# encouragements from within



## Re-visiting on the *Why*

The values, motives and opportunities  
of developing Open Dialogue practice

Dag Van Wetter

Open Dialogue trainers' training 2022-2024

focusgroups, people involved from different perspectives and roles, in various Flemish regions  
Why do we need the Open Dialogue approach?

What are the **values** and **motives** of the Open Dialogue approach?

What are the **opportunities** of developing Open Dialogue practice within the mental health system?

Themes that emerged:

- safe and calm
- a part of us all
- the captain of your own ship
- authentic response and follow-up
- deeper meanings and mildness
- co-creating a bigger dialogical picture

... but most of all, a powerful and meaningful collection of underlying quotes  
– refreshing , touching quotes, from people's own Open Dialogue experiences, hopes and needs,  
that still continue lingering, resonating and travelling within us



# encouragements from within

## Open Dialogue...

- invites us to **think out-of-the-box** about collaboration and co-creation / co-creativity
- lets **the people themselves** motivate us further:
  - experiencing the **impact and value** of really being listened to – real shared decision making – mutual support, understanding and connection
  - an **open and safe space** to seek words what is difficult to express, to find meaning in their experiences with illness using common human words – openness to **everyone's own perspective** and experiences – support from transparent **reflections** – providing the **time** needed – **being able to carry things together, move on** until the next meeting
- lets **professionals** testify that this
  - reminds and reconnects them with **the values and reasons why** they started with their job
  - triggers them to **leave the beaten track** and act as an **active participant, companion**
  - helps them **finding and bringing companions together**



# encouragements from within

## part of a bigger dialogical landscape

building alliances between mental health care organisations and teams

co-creating other community-based, recovery-oriented and rights-based practices (WHO)

Kwartiermaken (Quartermaking, fellow-citizenship), peer/family expertise training, Recovery Academies, Soteria houses, buddy projects, ...  
also new companions organising Open Circles in other regions, ...

- all developments in collaboration with people with lived/family experience
- these practices can be a lever, a logical gateway to each other, or can complement and re-inforce each other
- the shared principles can be important keys to 'regional embedding' and alliance between services, supporting sustained dialogue and continuity of care
- anyway, it is self-evident that Open Dialogue practice stays in dialogue with other approaches and practices





“Learn to **listen** so others are invited to **speak**.  
Learn to **speak** so others are invited to **listen**.”

a path is only created by  
walking on it  
**together**