

# CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR AFTER PARTICIPATION IN THREE AEQ PROGRAMMES

Final Report on a Qualitative Study of the Effectiveness of  
AEQ

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# 1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The AEQ method, which was developed by Aleš Ernst, has been practised in Slovenia since 2015. More than 10,000 people have encountered it in one-to-one and group programmes led by Aleš Ernst, with a further 20,000 people attending programmes led by other teachers.

The first quantitative study of the effectiveness of AEQ programmes was completed by Aleš Ernst and Janez Logar in April 2022. It showed that, on average, the programmes reduced the level of chronic pain and that this pain was strongly connected with the expression of negative affects, an absence of factors inhibiting strong impulses and a lack of understanding of oneself. It also revealed a moderate negative correlation with ability to function in life, self-acceptance, flexibility and openness.

No quantitative research has yet been conducted to verify AEQ as a method capable of changing the behaviour of individuals who have taken an active part in the programmes and integrated the method into their daily lives. The study posed the following research question: Did individuals who took part in at least three AEQ programmes led by Aleš Ernst experience changes in their behaviour? The study took place between April 2022 and March 2023.

## 1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY AND THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to find out whether (and how) people who had attended at least three AEQ group programmes led by Aleš Ernst had changed their behaviour or their attitude towards themselves, and their behaviour in partner relationships, as parents and at work.

The study was conducted with the help of a content analysis method and elements of grounded theory.

### 1.2.1 STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The participants were chosen randomly on the basis of availability and on the relevance of the following two criteria: they had taken part in at least three AEQ group programmes led by Aleš Ernst, and they were prepared to be interviewed about their experiences. Eleven people (eight women, three men) opted to take part in the study. Six of the participants

(54.5%) had had experience of one-to-one as well as group sessions, while the same number had been involved in a psychotherapeutic process or been receiving psychological treatment before or during the AEQ programmes (three before and three in parallel with the AEQ programmes).

*Table 1: Broad details of study participants*

	Participant's gender	Age	One-to-one AEQ sessions	Previous experience of psychotherapy or psychological treatment	Parallel psychotherapeutic processes of varying types
Interview 1	Male	40	No	Yes	No
Interview 2	Female	34	No	No	No
Interview 3	Female	48	No	Yes	No
Interview 4	Male	33	Yes	No	No
Interview 5	Female	42	Yes	No	Yes
Interview 6	Female	56	Yes	No	No
Interview 7	Male	47	Yes	No	No
Interview 8	Female	48	Yes	No	Yes
Interview 9	Female	45	No	No	No
Interview 10	Female	61	Yes	No	Yes
Interview 11	Female	36	Yes	Yes	No

## 1.2.2 MEASUREMENT TOOLS AND PROCEDURE

We collected data for analysis with the aid of a semi-structured interview designed for the purpose and covering the following areas: behaviour/attitude to oneself, behaviour in intimate relationships, behaviour in parental relationships, behaviour at work and experience of emotions.

The interviews comprised 11 main questions and one additional question asking the interviewee whether they wished to add anything.

Those taking part in the study signed an informed consent form stating that they were taking part freely and consciously, and gave consent to being recorded and to the use of the audio recordings or transcripts for the purpose of the study, with due compliance with personal data protection requirements.

All interviews were conducted via videolink. The sound was recorded and then transcribed for ease of processing. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and took place in a single session (with the exception of one participant, whose interview took place across two sessions).

We started out by analysing the qualitative data obtained using a content analysis method, followed by elements of grounded theory. We drew up a list of codes/coding categories prior to the first interview. We divided the categories into two levels. The first-level categories (C1) were in turn divided into two main categories: the situation before participation in the AEQ programmes and the situation after participation in at

least three programmes. C2 comprised the basic categories on the basis of which the text was coded.

The table below sets out the code book/codes we used in the study for both periods examined (i.e. before and after AEQ).

## CONTENT OF CODE

### **Awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body**

Present or good awareness

Absent or weak awareness

### **Attention to and care for one's body**

Responsiveness and adequate care

Lack of responsiveness and inadequate care

### **Self-acceptance**

Self-acceptance and positive feelings towards oneself

Lack of self-acceptance and negative feelings towards oneself

### **Attitude towards one's own responsibility in relationships**

Experiencing oneself as powerless/a victim

Experience of inner strength

Taking responsibility for oneself and one's own feelings and behaviour

Not taking responsibility for oneself and one's own feelings and behaviour

### **Patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships**

Adverse patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships

Positive patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships

### **Patterns of behaviour at work**

Adverse patterns of behaviour at work

Positive patterns of behaviour at work

### **Patterns of behaviour in parental relationships**

Adverse patterns of behaviour in parental relationships

Positive patterns of behaviour in parental relationships

We selected as the unit of analysis the shortest semantically complete part of the transcript that expressed the interviewee's experience or view of the topic being studied. Most often this was a statement or smaller sequence of statements relating to a single specific aspect of the speaker's experience. *For example: 'I haven't eaten yet. On quite a few occasions I didn't feel hungry. Even if someone had hit me, I don't know whether I would have felt anything. Such alienation from my body.'*

Before the analysis we read each interview several times and underlined the sentences connected to a specific code. We then entered the codes in Microsoft Excel and arranged them semantically. At the end we counted how many times a specific code appeared in the period studied (i.e. before and after participation in the AEQ programmes). We then analysed each of the codes with the aid of elements of grounded theory.

## 2.1 RESULTS

### 2.1.1 PARTICIPANTS' VIEW OF THEIR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS THEMSELVES

#### 2.1.1 AWARENESS OF PHYSICAL SENSATIONS AND CONTACT WITH ONE'S BODY

##### *2.1.1.1 Situation before AEQ*

The results of the analysis indicate that most of the participants (eight, or 72%) reported a weak or absent awareness of physical sensations or poor contact with their body before participation in the AEQ programmes. A lack of contact with feedback information from the body (or sensory motor amnesia) appeared, for example, as **attention to the body only in the case of pain**, which was accompanied by unpleasant sensations. It also manifested itself as **not knowing what it was like to be aware of one's body**, as a **feeling of alienation from one's body**, and as **disconnection between body, feelings and mind**. Statements such as the following express this: *'My attention (body) was aroused when something was bothering me. Until then it was something I ignored. It is part of me or I'm a part of it. When problems and pain appeared, they began to bother me and I became a little bit more attentive. Not attentive, but angrier. I would say.'* Another participant said: *'Before AEQ I almost never felt my body. I didn't perceive it. I was completely cut off from it. Because my whole body felt very hunched up. So I lived from the head up. I was so cut off from sensory perceptions that I felt completely disembodied, as if I wasn't here. Not connected inside. I live in only a small part of myself, the surface part in the head. To a certain extent I put my body to one side, and live only through this ego. This was an empty experience.'* And *'I have always worked only with my mind, my head. I didn't register my body at all.'*

In the case of one participant, this weak awareness of and contact with their body also meant **non-recognition of bodily needs** connected with going to the toilet and with hunger and thirst: *'I thought I knew what my body was telling me – at least I thought so. Now I know that I wasn't feeling anything – including, for example, going to the toilet to pee. I would hold it in until the last moment because I didn't have any feeling at all that my bladder was full'* or *'I wasn't eating. On quite a few occasions I didn't feel hungry. Even if someone had hit me, I don't know whether I would have felt anything. Such alienation from my body.'*

Poor contact with their body had also led several participants to **fail to recognise their own boundaries**: *'My body was warning me, it's just that I wasn't listening. I didn't know it was warning me'* or *'Even in my body I didn't use to feel anything until it became so strong. This is why I had so many problems setting boundaries. Then everything was acceptable.'* Poor contact with one's body was also connected with **non-recognition of one's emotional experiences**, as one participant described: *'People would leave me a little calmer and more satisfied, but I didn't feel like that at all.'*

Table 2: Frequency of statements relating to awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Absent or weak awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body	2	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	2	1	1	13
Present or good awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Absent or weak awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Present or good awareness of physical sensations and contact with one's body	3	2	1	3	0	0	1	2	2	0	4	18

### 2.1.1.2 Situation after AEQ

Table 2 shows that eight participants reported present or good awareness of their body or physical sensations after attending at least three AEQ programmes. They mentioned stronger awareness of themselves and expressed it as **'a different and fuller experience of self'** and **'as if I've woken up'**. For the participants, greater contact with one's body or a better awareness of physical sensations manifested itself as a **stronger perception of pain and fatigue, greater recognition of bodily needs** (e.g. greater perception of feedback from the body regarding hunger and thirst), and **better awareness of physical sensations connected with a certain emotional experience**: *'Now I feel everything. If I see a person I don't want to see, I feel it in my stomach ... The body tells you everything.'*

Some participants said that they **consciously focused on their body while breathing and moving, and asked themselves why they were bunched up or unable to move properly**: *'After AEQ I listen to my body more, am more aware of it' or 'I think a lot about how I'm*

*breathing and why I'm now walking so fast. And I ask myself: why are you walking so fast? Things like that' or 'The link between consciousness and the body, this sensory motor amnesia which is lessening in me. Which has really helped me ... Here my shoulders are really hunched forwards, because I'm trying to protect myself.'*

Participants reported that greater contact with their body was connected with **experiencing feelings as bodily experiences that covered the whole body** ('I used to feel things at the top, in the ego, now I feel them in my whole body and that's unbelievable. The whole body') and a **greater differentiation or demarcation between one's onwads feelings and those of others** ('I now feel that to an excessive degree. How someone is somehow stressing me out'). Two participants also pointed out that acknowledging their bodily sensations had led to **better acknowledgement of their own boundaries** or an **understanding of the body as a compass that enabled better or more integrated decision-making** that was not based solely on the mind: 'Because I feel my body. The body tells you everything. It's from my body that I get feelings. Because I used to resolve everything with my mind' and 'I work five to six days a week. That is entirely too much for me now that I can feel my body.'

As the results after at least three AEQ programmes show, important positive changes had occurred in relation to participants' awareness of their body and physical sensations. Most (eight) of the participants reported weak awareness of physical sensations and poor contact with their body before participation in the AEQ programmes (mentioned 13 times). None of them reported good awareness of their physical sensations or good contact with their body prior to participation. Eight participants reported experiences that indicated better contact with their body after three AEQ programmes (mentioned 18 times).

## 2.1.2 ATTENTION TO AND CARE FOR ONE'S BODY

Table 3: Frequency of statements relating to attention to and care for one's body

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Responsiveness and adequate care for one's body	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lack of responsiveness and inadequate care for one's body	5	1	0	1	1	0	2	3	3	3	3	22
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Responsiveness and adequate care for one's body	2	4	2	1	1	0	2	2	3	2	1	20



Lack of responsiveness and inadequate care	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
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2.1.2.1 Situation before AEQ

The results of the analysis show that most participants did not respond to their body’s needs and did not adequately care for their body prior to the AEQ programmes. This was discussed a total of 22 times by nine of the eleven participants.

Five of them highlighted how the absence of contact with their body had led them to **overburdening their body without considering how much they could take**. They were **unable to stop and rest, and to find a balance between work, rest and recreation**: *‘If I thought about something, I had to do it. Even if it was three o’clock in the morning. Before, when I was so utterly exhausted that I could barely stand, I was satisfied for maybe five minutes, say. Because I felt that yes, today I’ve been good’ or ‘I didn’t use to have the best attitude towards my body. I had never been a very tolerant person. Especially if I look at how I had to follow everything through to the end. I wasn’t able to find it, but now it’s enough. That’s how I worked with my body as well, even during training or at work’ or ‘I used to do loads physically, then nothing, then loads again, then nothing’ or ‘I wasn’t gentle with my body. I had it in my head that you had to do loads of things in the shortest possible time. You can’t do that if you listen to your body. That’s clear to me now. I was occasionally extremely productive and didn’t even sit down’ and ‘I was going at three hundred miles an hour in those jobs. And I was working in more dynamic jobs, such as waitress, and I was constantly on my feet. There this constant speed. Completely cut off from my body, and in the afternoon there was a whole bunch of social contacts, friendships. I didn’t know what rest and relaxation meant.’*

One participant pointed out that **only physical injury would give him ‘permission’ to rest**: *‘Sometimes, from tiredness, I wanted to get injured and, in fact, that happened on two occasions Because I was so tired and I didn’t know any other way of saying “stop”. That enough was enough and I needed a break. Because it was always only: This is training, you don’t have the option of stopping. Rest when you can rest, during training and competition.’*

**Insensitivity and roughness towards the body in response to the appearance of pain** was also commonly reported (by five interviewees). **They denied, ignored and resisted pain** in order to achieve their goals. *‘I used to resist pain. It was a battle. It was like: What are you going to do now? Are you going to cry? You have a match, you have to get to the end. Set yourself targets’ or ‘If there was pain, I took a pill instead of thinking about why it hurt. Even though there was such intense neuropathic pain, I didn’t take time off from work. I barely made it to the medical centre, got an injection, then went back to work.’* The three other participants said: *‘I was really unkind to my body. I would march forward with my body like a tempest. Without considering. Even after I was given various diagnoses.’* And:

*'This pain was torturing me. On the other hand, there was denial, non-acceptance and continuing rough behaviour. It got worse ... We will get through this by force. It can be resolved. It has to be resolved.'* And *'It was as if there was never a problem, even if I was absolutely exhausted. That's what has to be done. If something hurts, grit your teeth, patch it up, put a sticking plaster over it ... Good, my arm's not been ripped off, luckily. Or my foot.'* Another participant recalled: *'Once I stepped on a nail and I really couldn't be bothered to go to the doctor. I didn't want to go, I had already pulled it out. It restricted me. I had children to look after. A house. Everything was more important than me. I really treated my body badly. No respect.'*

Three participants reported that **ignoring feedback from the body and demolishing their boundaries** in the face of pain was, for them, an **important source of pride and brought a feeling of power and worth**. For example: *'If I injured myself, I was a bit happy, as it meant I could prove to myself that I was able to take it. I had nothing to moan about.'* And *'I had to get to the end whatever the cost. Even if it hurt – on occasions, particularly if it hurt – because it meant that I could go through myself, that I could do it.'* And *'The harder it was, the more pressure I was under, the more I would tell myself that I could handle it. It was no problem. This was a satisfying feeling for me, to know how much I could take.'*

Inadequate care for one's body also manifested itself as **disregard of the physiological need to go to the toilet and the need to eat**: *'I didn't drink or eat anything, because I thought it wasn't worth feeding my body, because I didn't deserve it anyway.'* Two interviewees also mentioned excessive alcohol use: *'I used to have a very unhealthy lifestyle, including too much alcohol, all the toxic things.'*

#### 2.1.2.2 Situation after AEQ

Only one person reported disregarding and inadequately caring for their body after involvement in the AEQ programmes, specifically in relation to **ignoring fatigue**: *'Even though I still tend to ignore slight pain and say to myself, I have to go on, there's no time to rest. So that ... This tiredness is probably one step before pain. I still don't take tiredness entirely seriously. I don't go to bed early, I don't sleep enough, but I nevertheless do look at things differently.'*

On the other hand, ten of the eleven participants reported responding to and adequately caring for their body after attending the AEQ programmes.

The approach to pain, which used to be negative and expressed itself as non-acceptance, denial, rejection and roughness, had been transformed into **an acceptance of pain**. It was **not seen as weakness and the response to it was more gentle**: *'Pain is no longer weakness. I don't push it away anymore. I don't resist it. I see pain differently now, I soften it. I somehow manage it so that it goes away ... I know how to release it, find a position.'* Another participant said: *'There have been relapses. A colleague called and said "I won't be here for two months, I've injured my finger." I didn't have anyone to do the out-of-office work. Within half an hour, I was in the kind of pain from worry that I'd experienced before*

AEQ. But at least I know now that I'm doing it to myself. And I don't take any painkillers. I try to relax. Warm water and a bit of salt helps me. Or chilli plasters and preparations that work on the pain site locally ... The pain passes after a couple of days. Not permanently. These things go up and down.

**Pain is interpreted as a teacher that warns you that you're overstepping the boundary:** 'If something hurts, I take that as my body saying, yes, you're overdoing it again. I try to work out why something is hurting me again' and 'It hits you in the face again. You've gone too far again, and taken one step back.' At the same time, pain **turns our attention inwards and makes us reflect on what we need to change in our behaviour:** 'Ah, yes, this is hurting me because things are like this. I need to relax and move like this ...' or 'What wasn't hurting me before, I feel it more now. And then: Ok, what could this be and then I "try" to change it' and 'When you don't feel your body, you can't know whether you've gone too far. Now, when pain arrives, my first thought is not: I have to take a pill. Instead I think, ok, I'm the one responsible for going too far. Now I have to rest.'

The analysis also showed that there were important changes in how people paid attention to the **abilities (or limits) of their own body**. Instead of overdoing it, four of the participants specifically pointed out that after the AEQ programmes they could **rest when they needed to** and that this was not accompanied by any unpleasant thoughts. 'There's no more of that now. I go slowly and I go for a rest. I do only as much as I can. If I don't want to do more, I leave it if it's really not urgent. So that's a big difference. If I don't feel like doing anything, I can sit on the couch all day, but I don't beat myself up about it. That's what I would do before. I would whip myself, to coin a phrase' or 'Even when cycling ... Colleagues have all done 1,000 to 5,000 km already. I've barely done 100, 200. And I say: I can't, there's no time, I'm worn out. I recently went on a ride for two hours. If you'd asked me two years ago, I would have had to cycle away. And I would have been worried. These days I don't worry.' Another participant said: 'If I find during the day that I'm not holding myself properly, if I feel that too much masculine energy is tightening me up ... I go and rest ...'

Participants reported that, after the AEQ programmes, they **managed their energy more efficiently** and **realised that inefficient use of that energy brought negative consequences:** 'I now know how to manage my energy. I no longer have a hundred things to do. I don't go for a coffee with someone just to pass the time. If I'm tired, I'll have a lie down rather than go for a walk or a bike ride.' And 'Because now ... Even now I don't feel well enough give up, lots of times ... Lots of time then and afterwards I just give up. If it's enough for the day, it's enough. I know that if I push something today, I'll be lying down for three days unable to do anything.' One of the participants reported that she now more readily accepted the physical limitations and changes brought about by the ageing process: 'I have fewer activities. At the same time, I'm noticing that I'm getting older. That I can no longer do as much. But anyway, the attitude is more positive. I listen to myself more, I know what the problem is.'

Some noticed that they **moved more consciously and gently:** 'Every day, but I basically try

*to observe how I'm moving during the day. I'm slowing down now. I pay attention to how I'm breathing. How I move ... Before, everything was moving so quickly. Now I'm more attentive to that' or 'I behave differently towards my body. I don't force it anymore. Particularly physically. I play tennis differently now. I run, but when I run or have to catch up with someone, a dog or a friend, or if I'm late, I run differently. I no longer start without considering whether my body is warmed up, whether it's ready or whether it's sensible to run. Once I start, I manage to feel my way towards and find the speed that's efficient and that makes sense. Not like I lived before, with an athlete's ego.'*

One new development that we noticed in the analysis was that participants felt a **desire to move in response to unpleasant feelings and in order to experience their own worth** and not only with the goal of achieving results; they were therefore able to **consciously allot time to relaxing activities and AEQ exercises**, which they felt helped them. For example: *'Now I find it easier to be constantly physically active ... I am also more enthusiastic about working out and going to the woods. It seems to me that I'm ready. That I feel within myself, and that this desire ... In my opinion, it comes from within ... But it is also a decision. The two things together. First from the inside, then comes the decision. The desire to change something, that I'm ready to go for it ... The decision to do it now, that I deserve it, that my body deserves it. And that if I don't look after myself, no one else is going to do it for me. That helps me. I do these AEQ exercises almost every day: I breathe ...'*

Another participant said: *'I've slowly found a new balance because I found in the old one a way of surviving. Even in terms of sport ... I had to ... I was less involved in sport. I forced myself less. I go more for myself, not in order to achieve something.'* A third said: *'I have found time for myself. I get up at 5.30 in order to do 25 minutes of exercise and then I get ready for work. I haven't given up.'* And *'I look after my body better now. Not in the sense of muscles and working out, but relaxation. I do AEQ exercises and physical activity. I've come up with an individual workout regime in the morning before work because I get tired in the evening.'*

The last important change that we can identify in the analysis relating to care for one's body is **better identification of and greater attention to one's own real needs**, as shown in the following statements: *'I'm a lot less keen on chocolate. I've just got my period. It used to be normal for me to eat sweet things ... Now, I'm not interested in crisps ... So I went to buy some Twix and Snickers. I took one bite and said to myself: Why have I gone out and bought this stuff? I don't feel like it. But I do drink a bit more.'* And *'I don't overeat. Certainly three quarters less.'*

## 2.1.3 SELF-ACCEPTANCE

### 2.1.3.1 Situation before AEQ

More than half the participants (six of eleven) reported not accepting properly themselves and experiencing negative feelings about themselves before taking part in the AEQ programmes.

Table 4: Frequency of statements relating to self-acceptance

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Self-acceptance and positive feelings towards oneself	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not accepting oneself and negative feelings	7	0	0	0	2	0	2	2	6	0	1	20
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Self-acceptance and positive feelings towards oneself	4	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	5	2	1	18
Not accepting oneself and negative feelings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

Lack of self-acceptance manifested itself as **refusing to accept fallibility and imperfection (or perfectionism)**. Mistakes caused shame and a feeling of incompetence. For example: *‘I should be perfect because I’m a trainer and I shouldn’t have these intensities’* or *‘Before, there was shame, guilt, resistance to mistakes.’* Another participant said: *‘They instilled in me this feeling like, you can’t do this, it’s not for you, you’re not competent. They taught me that. Everything went in that direction. And whenever I couldn’t do something, I took it personally. Yeh, you know, because you’re no good.’* **Postponing things** was one of the **defence mechanisms against the feelings of incompetence** that would arise when internal criteria were not met. *‘When I set myself some task, physical, emotional or mental, and I knew that I couldn’t do it straightaway, I would delay, postpone. Because I wouldn’t be doing it so quickly anyway, it was better I didn’t do it at all.’*

Some participants also mentioned the **feeling of ‘not being good enough’** (e.g. *‘Whatever I do, I have the feeling that it’s not good enough’* and *‘I didn’t feel good enough’*) and of a

**lack of self-worth:** *'I felt that I wasn't good enough. I felt like a tramp. Who's going to talk to me?'* Several participants **tried to get a feeling of worth through external actions.** *'This feeling that you have to do something to ensure that you're at least ok is quite strong.'* At the same time, they found it **difficult to identify and evaluate their own abilities and work:** *'It then rips me apart. With me, I do something ... It's ok, but it could be better. It's a never-ending story. You're just focusing on what else you can do. There's a lot, so you exhaust yourself and get tired and you don't get enough holiday and rest. Then you can't see anything in a positive light. Whatever I do, I have the feeling that it's not good enough'* or *'I was clearly completely unfocused, unsure of myself, that this phenomenon told me that this wasn't it.'*

One of the participants highlighted a **lack of sympathy and love for herself.** This led to a conviction that she didn't deserve loving relationships with others: *'I said to myself that I deserved such behaviour. And that envy.'* At the same time, she was unable to accept her own desires and needs (including physical) as legitimate because of this lack of self-worth. *'I didn't drink or eat anything, because I thought it wasn't worth feeding my body, because anyway I didn't deserve it'* and *'I didn't buy myself or treat myself to anything. For my children yes, but what did I need? That feeling of inferiority. I was unfriendly to myself. I had desires, but felt that they weren't for me. Because I didn't deserve them.'*

The analysis shows that in some cases there was a **lack of acceptance when it came to body image (experiencing the body as ugly):** *'Up until 2014 I was convinced that I was the ugliest and that I should be grateful that I had this husband. I remember saying to a friend when deciding to get divorced that I knew I wouldn't get anyone else because no one would even look at me. I was one hundred per cent convinced.'* Another participant described it this way: *'I didn't like my body. Basically I put more demands on it. AEQ helped me realise the neglectful relationship I was having with my body. What demands I was putting on it.'* This internal monologue was extremely negative when the body did not respond: *'The internal monologue with my body was very negative. Because I didn't respect it and treated it badly, we were not in a good relationship with each other. I became angry very quickly because it didn't give me what I wanted.'*

Lack of self-acceptance also manifested itself as **lack of confidence in and fear of one's own reactions,** which were **interpreted as proof of one's inner 'badness':** *'Before AEQ I was scared of myself. What I would do if someone lifted the rock'* or *'Fear that I would be bad, if someone pushed me to that point'* and *'I never allowed myself to have a lot because I was always scared that I would waste it all. Patterns, stories from childhood and how they treated money. I was always in some way only just about making to the end of the month. I never permitted myself more because more was already too much. I had to be modest and, if I did have something, I had to get rid of it all because I shouldn't have had it in the first place.'*

The last of the expressions of a lack of self-acceptance that we were able to identify in the analysis was an **inability to see oneself as authentic.** With regard to this, one of the participants said: *'I'm otherwise fun and relaxed, which is a great thing to be, but is bad if*

*it's conditional and not spontaneous. This spontaneity had to be controlled ... And when spontaneity could be spontaneous had to be controlled as well. When to let go.'* Another participant said: *'But I lost myself in all these stories. I was like this one or that one. If I was me, then that wasn't ok and I didn't belong.'*

### 2.1.3.2 Situation after AEQ

The results of the analysis show that only one of the participants continued to experience problems with **self-acceptance** after participating in the AEQ programmes. This manifested itself in **perfectionism**. *'I can acknowledge that feeling, that nothing one does is enough and I'm able to tell myself that this is the wrong approach to take. But I find myself in situations where the feeling remains very strong. That's been in me for years.'*

While none of the participants highlighted self-acceptance and positive feelings towards oneself prior to participation in the AEQ programmes, the situation had changed after the programmes. More than half (six of eleven) reported experiencing greater self-acceptance and more positive feelings after AEQ.

Where there was lack of acceptance of one's mistakes and perfectionism before AEQ, participants reported **accepting their own humanity** (limitations, mistakes and failures) and not feeling that they did not threaten their worth after the programmes. Some of the statements attesting to these changes are as follows:

*'I've acknowledged myself now and tell other people out loud that I can't do any more. So when someone asks me how I am, I tell them: not great. I admit it out loud that I can't do any more. It was too much' and 'It's slipped out of my hands, so what now? I'm a human being. I carry no shame or guilt or resistance in me. About whether I have to be perfect because I'm a trainer because I'm in charge of people and shouldn't have these intense feelings ... I'm more aware of my own humanity.'* And *'That's how I know myself now. And if I do overdo it one day, I'm completely exhausted the next and I rest more. I don't worry whether I've overdone it. That's a big difference.'*

One of the participants also talked about being **more patient with and gentle to himself during the processes of change**: *'But I know that I have to give time space to this change, these events and these this process. Aha, ok, now I'm doing this, now I will change. Not all at once. More respectfully, not only seriously and immediately. This responsibility has spilled over into something more meaningful. And is still spilling over.'* Another interviewee also highlighted **feeling pride in her personal growth**. *'I'm proud of myself. Because I've changed my life since I began to work on myself, I reckon by 360 degrees.'*

The feeling of being bad as opposed to good, which was mentioned by one of the participants as being present before AEQ, was replaced by a **feeling of being good deep down** after the programmes.

*'I haven't thought about that fear for a long time now. How bad I was if someone pressed on that spot. I cannot be as bad as I can be good. I understand that weakness differently. It can't scare me anymore.'*

Self-acceptance also manifested itself as **greater confidence in herself**. *'There's no longer so much self-doubt. I trust myself more now. I don't allow this doubt to consume me or hamper my creativity.'*

Where many felt considerable pressure from a lack of self-worth or of love for themselves before embarking on the AEQ programmes, they highlighted **greater love for themselves** after participation: *'I like myself better'* or *'Now I also like myself more. Because why wouldn't I?'* They also talked about **greater self-respect and self-confidence** ('With that I respect myself more and am more self-confident'), **greater self-awareness** ('Now I know better what I am and what I want') and a **feeling of worth and equality with others**. On this topic, one of the participants said: *'Everything has changed. I view it completely differently now to before. It was awful. Now I know that I'm worthy of having a normal life like everyone else.'*

The analysis showed that important changes had also taken place in participants' **ability to accept their desires and attend to their own needs**, something that had been absent for several of them prior to the AEQ programmes. After the programmes, they highlighted accepting their desires as legitimate: *'I admit to myself: how much I can do, how much I can't. Or whether I want to at all.'*

The analysis also pointed to noticeable changes in experience and acceptance of one's body. After taking part in AEQ programmes, participants **accepted and liked their body more**.

*'Through AEQ I learned to love my body. And I truly like myself more and more. I look in the mirror and say, wow, that's who I am.'* Another participant highlighted **better recognition, acceptance and expression of her femininity**. *'My psychotherapist, when she saw me in this period, when I was going to AEQ and getting to know my partner, noticed that I had actually become a woman. At first I was a helpless girl, then, when I began fighting for myself, I became a man, because at home my father and mother still ... At work, I was anyway always among men. Then in this recent period I felt ... And I also feel it in my movements ... And in my relationship with my partner ... This relationship with my current partner is completely different to what I was experiencing before. Now I really feel this femininity.'*

In addition to this, participants also **felt more respect and sympathy for their body**, as the following statements show: *'So, this was a shock. That you really see what's happening inside. And I was really shaken up. I had no idea that my body was suffering so much. That it was crying out, wounded, damaged'* and *'Now I'm a lot more respectful towards my body and automatically to other people as well.'* One of the interviewees said that **experiencing greater love towards herself had reduced her dependence on food as an emotional**



**regulator.** *'I like myself more and, with that, has come a greatly reduced need to overindulge.'*

## 2.1.4 ATTITUDE TO ONE'S OWN RESPONSIBILITIES IN RELATIONSHIPS

One of the aspects of experiencing oneself that we wished to examine in the study was the attitude towards one's own responsibilities in relationships. We were interested in the situation before and after the AEQ programmes with regard to the experience of inner strength and taking responsibility for one's own needs, feelings and behaviour in relationships.

*Table 5: Frequency of statements relating to attitude to one's own responsibility within relationships*

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Experiencing oneself as powerless/a victim	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	0	1	8
Experiencing inner strength	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not taking responsibility	2	3	1	1	3	0	2	5	0	1	2	20
Taking responsibility for one's own needs, feelings and behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Experiencing oneself as powerless/a victim	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Experiencing inner strength	0	2	2	0	4	0	1	2	4	1	0	16
Not taking responsibility	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Taking responsibility for one's own needs, feelings and behaviour	6	2	7	1	6	2	3	5	3	2	7	44

#### 2.1.4.1 Situation before AEQ

##### *Experiencing oneself as a victim vs. experiencing inner strength*

The analysis showed that, prior to participation in the AEQ programmes, almost half the participants (five of eleven) reported **experiencing themselves as powerless/a victim**: *'The pattern I followed was as some kind of victim. Something would happen and I would close myself up into a ball, I was powerless, other people were putting me under pressure and I was in a sorry state that I couldn't get out of.'* The interviewees mentioned **feelings of powerlessness and of being trapped in situations and relationships that were unpleasant for them**. For example: *'I was in a situation of desperate powerlessness. I couldn't change a thing, it was so suffocating. I really did think that I was unable to change anything.'* One of the participants also highlighted her **feelings of anger when help was not forthcoming from others**: *'I was consumed by the feeling that no one was helping me. Someone would make me angry and I would be like: Why are they making me angry? Why are they fucking around with me? I haven't done anything.'*

There was also **self-pity at having to adjust to other people's needs**.

*'I would often feel sorry for myself. That I was a victim, that I had to suffer and that I had to adjust to everyone else. I had that feeling a lot.'*

Before AEQ, a **stress response would be activated very quickly and strongly** in situations which, after the programmes, began to feel manageable and defined as a challenge. *'It was like that sometimes, when there was some difficult situation ... These days I call them challenges, but at that time everything stressed me out. I would freeze, completely freeze. That was so horrible. That powerlessness again. I didn't feel capable of sorting it out ... So many things I had in my body and everywhere, blocked. I would move into freeze mode. I didn't even fight or flee.'* This feeling of powerlessness could also be the reason for not finishing certain activities. *'Because of this powerlessness, I didn't always complete things. I would start something, but not finish it.'*

On the other hand, none of the participants highlighted inner strength as something they experienced prior to participation in the AEQ programmes.

##### *Taking vs. not taking responsibility*

Most of the participants (nine of eleven) shared many experiences of **not taking responsibility** for their own needs, feelings and behaviour before attending the AEQ programmes (mentioned a total of 20 times).

The analysis showed that not taking responsibility for one's own behaviour and feelings was expressed in five ways. One of the ways was to **pin the blame on personal characteristics that were 'unchangeable', inherited and before which the person**

**concerned was powerless:** *'Before, it was: Well, that's what I'm like. I'm really volatile and get angry quickly. I got this from my father, quite typically' or 'I didn't like some of the habits or behaviour that were placed on me. But then I would find an excuse. Yes, it has to be like that, or: That's what I'm like.'* Another way in which not taking responsibility was experienced was as an **inability to see and take responsibility for one's own contribution to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, or pinning all the responsibility on others.** For example: *'It was always the same process. When I reacted strongly, I got to the point where I would pin the blame on others. I felt anger, hatred and powerlessness. I didn't see myself at all, where I fitted into this context. That was a pattern from home. Someone else is responsible for everything, not you.'*

Some **took too much responsibility** and would sometimes **fluctuate between pinning all the responsibility on others and then on themselves.** *'Before AEQ and school, I would blame others for any unpleasant situation. Or blame everything on myself, that I was the one to blame for everything.'* There was also **waiting around passively so that an unpleasant or unjust situation resolved itself:** *'Before AEQ I would roll myself up into a ball and cry and I really would be in a bad way ... I would feel that my life was awful and I was in a position from which there was no way out. Since I was a young child I have felt like I have a flame inside me. Some urge, desire to change that has always emerged from me. I wanted something, but would conclude again that I couldn't do it and then fell back and kept on waiting' or 'I have in fact resolved many problems in my life by simply letting them resolve themselves over time. But I see that they have not been resolved. We know that nothing goes away but moves somewhere else.'*

If we look in more detail at the ways in which **excessive responsibility in relationships** works, we can identify the following types of behaviour:

- Taking responsibility for the **emotional well-being** of others at the expense of oneself: *'I have always operated in such a way that if my surroundings are calm, so am I. And I have always anticipated what I would have to do to ensure that the people around me were reassured. The worse thing for me was to see sadness or dejection in other people. So I got used to lifting people's spirits, which would in turn calm me down.'*
- Assuming a **rigid role as the 'go-to' person** if friends or colleagues needed someone to **listen or solve their problems:** *'Before, it was anyone who had a problem ... I was the person to go to. I was already engaged in counselling tasks at work and everyone with a problem came to me. That was completely normal. And if I think about it, I have a job in which I solve negative problems. Then everyone who has a problem comes to me outside work as well. But I used to think it was fine' or 'I was always helping a colleague out and giving her money.'*
- **Undefined relations with one's original family or role reversal:** *'It always used to be me who got my father out of bother. Drove him to the hospital. That was me. And the same with my mother, who had no strength to do anything, nothing. She would also start panicking. And then I had to sort things out. I felt that I had to.'*

- **Erasing one's authenticity and making excessive efforts to adjust:** *'That was actual powerlessness, but I never thought that people could change. I would give more thought to what I do in order for them to change something. More and more I ... I would try this and then that and then that ... I would look for ways to make things happen. And that went nowhere.'*
- **Inability to set boundaries and keep to them:** *'Sometimes I didn't dare say anything. A lot of times I ... I didn't dare express any disagreement. I found something ... That's fine because I can' or 'They used to compliment me for being a good listener, attentive, even too gentle with them, but I wasn't like that to myself. They took advantage of me, I was always available and always did everything and straightaway.'* Some participants reported a fear of setting their boundaries and a conviction that setting them wasn't the right thing to do (*'I didn't use to dare, I was brought up to think that you shouldn't say anything. I stayed silent and bottled it all up'*) and pleasing others by not asserting a right to their own authenticity: *'I used to think: Yes, I have to. It's only right that you do. Yes, because they all do it. You really should be doing this for as long as it takes.'* Participants also mentioned the need for acceptance and an inability to tolerate others' feelings of disappointment: *'I did a lot on the basis of what my mother-in-law or father-in-law would say. I couldn't stand the idea that one of them would be disappointed in me.'* On the other hand, the absence of inner strength and of the ability to set boundaries, which might have provided a feeling of security in relationships, could lead to over-defensiveness and to an escape from relationships: *'I used to escape from my own family and other people quite a bit because of the constant drama. Into solitude. But escape was no solution either. I put up a wall and I didn't want other people to see what I was feeling inside.'*
- **Inability to accept help offered by others, to cede control:** *'I also accept other people doing things, not just me. It used to be the case that if anyone asked me, I would be on it straightaway.'*

None of the participants either highlighted or reported accepting responsibility for their own needs, feelings and behaviour prior to participation in the AEQ programmes.

#### 2.1.4.2 Situation after AEQ

##### *Experiencing inner strength*

None of the interviewees mentioned feeling powerless or like a victim after participation in at least three AEQ programmes – on the contrary, more than half (seven of eleven) talked about **experiencing inner strength and an absence of powerlessness**, as well expressed in the following two statements: *'Strength arrived all of a sudden'* and *'There's no longer this feeling of powerlessness'*.

This change manifested itself as an **awareness of the power to change one's life** (*'If you can do something in that direction, towards moving things along. And that's the biggest*

*relief of all to me: that I know that I can change my life. And everything has followed on from that') and as an **absence of experiencing oneself as a victim**: 'I would say that that is a pattern that has been changed by AEQ. I don't play the role of victim anymore.'*

It is experienced as a **power that enables authentic expression and differentiation** and as decisiveness and the ability to express oneself without fear (*'I am more decisive. I know how to express myself and dare to express myself'*), in **trusting oneself** (*'No one will silence me ever again'*) and in **anger that leads to an expression of one's individuality** (*'That's the difference. That anger came out with AEQ and lit that fire and was permitted to return. But I wasn't looking for revenge; it was about allowing myself to become my own person'*). At the same time, it also led to an **acceptance of one's own needs and desires**: *'Now I am more decisive and better able to consciously say yes to my desires and needs'*.

Participants also highlighted the **strength to resolve relationships** (*'Now I feel responsibility and have more strength to resolve things'* [relationship with his wife]), and the **strength to set boundaries or strike a balance between distance from and closeness to others** (*'I am no longer around those people who didn't respect me. I found the strength, that is the biggest change'*). Another participant related how this strength had helped her to end a violent relationship: *'My ex is still psychologically unstable ... He was aggressive. He and his family did not expect me to leave. They didn't think I was capable of it. They expected me to stay where I was [...] But I became so strong that I even surprised myself. In those three months I managed to push myself so much, I was being a bit of a masochist ... But I got to the point where I was able to make a properly clean break and I moved forward with pure purpose. So I wasn't chasing after anything anymore. It was very unexpected because I was a completely different person to before.'* The same interviewee **also lost her fear of men**: *'I'm not scared of men anymore, but I have had difficult experiences. And now I don't let them frighten me.'*

This inner strength also emerged in the **expression of healthy anger designed to shift things in the desired direction**.

*'At the same time you can basically communicate with people so that they know when you're really saying something. You look them in the eye and your words acquire incredible power. They feel your energy and it's therefore easier to assert your will when required. Then you get it all out and you calm yourself down that way.'*

Another important area in which changes appeared was the **feeling of physical strength or support for the body in stressful situations**, which were now **more manageable** because of the feelings of inner strength:

*'That's not stressful to me now. It's a challenge to me. I'm happy to go and do whatever. That support for the body. That my legs support me, that I can breathe, feel my body, feel that I'm strong. I've also put on ten kilos. Sometimes I didn't use to eat or drink. And there was no support from my body. My mind was going: "Do this, that, then that, then that". Now everything is in harmony. It doesn't even occur to me to push myself so much. But I feel that I'm strong and can do this. My appetite is better. Strength in the body.'*

*Taking responsibility for one's own needs, feelings and behaviour*

The analysis showed that all 11 participants in the study reported taking a certain responsibility for their own needs, feelings or behaviour (mentioned 44 times). If they mentioned feeling a great deal of powerlessness and waiting passively for negative situations to resolve themselves before the AEQ programmes, several participants said that they felt **responsibility for their own lives** after the programmes, e.g. *'I increasingly felt how much I was overstepping my own boundaries. That was the main theme of my life. If I was responsible for my own life, why was I letting this happen? Look, they don't work on themselves and that was normal to them ... But not to me. I had to take these uncomfortable steps and see that it was ok.'*

Taking responsibility is manifested as the **clear expression of one's own thoughts and feelings**, e.g. *'It is a challenge for me to communicate that back. Because my first thought is: ok, let him think that. If his response to me is so energetic, then it's right that I give him my opinion anyway. I usually stop at this point, but at the next opportunity I usually say something' or 'Now I'm bolder and I speak up. I have developed to the point where I try to express myself with emotional intelligence. Not rudely, but clearly.'*

They also mentioned **taking responsibility for their own needs**: *'I also understood, I'm changing, I also have different needs. I can see that I like above-average solitude and peace and that that's ok' or 'I have begun to see what is really necessary. Some stressful situation on television, what others are going through that I cannot influence ... I have begun to eliminate all that ... Because I could no longer take it anymore. I don't follow the news anymore because I can see that I'm listening to negative things that I can have no influence over, my body starts getting restless because it's still so weak. It's not that I want to avoid this forever ... It's a phase at the moment, of me listening to and seeing myself ... It doesn't bring me anything good ... In any case I can't do anything positive.'*

Participants mentioned that after AEQ they were **better able to follow their own desires and interests**. *'I prefer to do things that make me happier. I've already started on the garden and planted flowers. That calms me, it's nice. Garden, plants, I like to go to the woods, travelling. Things like that. So, pleasure in life' and 'Up to now I've always gone for exercise that is cheap and in groups. Now I've said to myself, no, I'm going to do it on my own. So I can focus only on myself.'* At the same time they are also able to set boundaries and say no. *'I went to one gym, then they changed the system and everyone was working out with headphones and music. And it got on my nerves so much, all this technology. I don't need that. And so I told them, no, I don't like this gym, I'm going to look for another one' and 'I know how to say no loud and clear'.*

Several participants also mentioned **managing the time available to them more responsibly or efficiently**: *'My time is now more evenly distributed. I'm more aware of time. There's this much time available today, tomorrow there'll be this much. Even now I sometimes manage time inefficiently ... Because it's a process' and 'I'm aware that now is a moment that will soon be gone. In this sense: that you should do what you want to do, that you don't put it off, that there's less of it. Even in the small things.'* *'Then I felt that I was*

*slowly realising how much time I needed for something. When I would do something and be able to have some time to myself.'*

They also realised that after the AEQ programmes they were **able to make a distinction between their own worth and the opinions of others** – that they no longer took others' responses personally and found it easier to take criticism. For example: *'Regardless of how he said it and what he said, that's his business. You don't take it as personally' or 'Now, with AEQ, I have turned my attention on myself. I don't try and read their thoughts. What others think is no longer important to me. Now, it's "who cares?" Even if I see that someone has a bad opinion of me, it's to my credit that I can put that opinion aside. It means that I'm ok. That's a big step forward and one that I attribute to AEQ. That clarity and that concentration on myself. When you go into yourself with AEQ and feel your muscles and feelings, it's easier to define ... You actually talk to yourself and don't look at them.'*

One of the participants also mentioned **greater financial responsibility**. *'I can see that it's no longer like this. I'm not as reckless with money as I used to be. I was more reckless with less than I am now with more. I'm more careful, more responsible with my finances.'*

Several participants said that they had assumed too much responsibility in relationships prior to AEQ, but were able to **set boundaries and expect joint responsibility in relationships** after attending the programmes. They therefore highlighted their conscious entry into and co-creation of healthy relationships, **where there was reciprocity and the possibility of growth in both sides**. For example: *'Now, since AEQ, I've reduced this overgiving. It was too much. Now I turn inwards and am able to express love and help in a more balanced way. Now it's less for others and more for myself.'* Another participant said: *'By having fewer of those one-to-one relationships. I now know how to identify and reject the leeches, and let those people in who also give me something. Now I have healthy relationships in which everyone grows. Generally, each person works on themselves and then we get together and discuss and we have a good time.'* A third participant said: *'After I stopped lending her money, she didn't even wish me a happy birthday. She ignored me for some time. This bothered me at first. Then I made contact, but now I'm much more "Ok, if you don't, I won't either". I would have felt guilty before, but now I don't.'*

The analysis also showed that the participants had begun to **take much more responsibility for regulating closeness and distance in these relationships** – that is, through clearer awareness of self and of one's needs and desires, they **found it easier to begin to set boundaries in cases where there was no joint responsibility in a relationship**. *'Now it is much more important to me to communicate, to say something, express myself. Then it is what it is. If you can do anything more, do it. Otherwise, leave it. Because sometimes I used to push and push with everything I had' or 'But sometimes you just have to accept that he feels that way. How much work you'll have with a person and deep you'll go with them again depends on you' or 'When something happens again and there's no responsibility in that person and you look to yourself to try and do something more for things to be ok ... I'm not doing that anymore. Now I'm quick to work out whether a person is someone I want to talk to ...'* and *'With this development process I can say therefore that*



*these days I connect with someone to get to know them, then I decide what I want with them and decide for myself' and 'There's not that pressure: do that, you're not good enough, do that quickly, why haven't you done it yet? Now I don't worry about that at all. Now I know why they have done it: because I allowed it, because I didn't set any boundaries. I have also stopped worrying about myself and nothing bothers me anymore. And those people ... I don't hang out with people who restrict or threaten me.'*

Better processes of demarcation also began to manifest themselves as a **reduction in the impulse to immediately respond to requests and satisfy the needs of others**, and the **ability to accept help**. For example: *'Now I offer much less help to others than I used to, when I wanted to solve everyone's problems' and 'So I stopped. I don't do that anymore, solving everything at once. Reacting frantically or immediately to requests. I don't seek them out anymore. I used to invite them in order to be useful' or 'I also accept someone else doing something, not just me doing everything. It used to be the case that if anyone asked me, I would be on it straightaway. Now it's like: aha, ok, fine. Others will do it, I don't need to, thank God.'*

Taking responsibility for one's own feelings, needs and behaviour also led to the **setting of boundaries in the primary family**, particularly when there were non-functioning patterns of interaction (manifested as refusing to accept the role of scapegoat or adult child, giving priority to the new family one had created over the family of origin, setting boundaries for disrespectful family members).

For example: *'I told my mother, I know I've done things differently for this many years or decade, but this is now going to change because I can't do it anymore. I would prefer to stop this co-dependence, separate my space from yours' or 'I have now got to the point where, if I want to protect myself and my own family, it's better for me to shunt my primary family into a siding. Otherwise the whole train grinds to a halt rather than just one carriage. And then things improved, visibly improved. Now I set aside time for them.'*

Another participant said in connection with this: *'And I understand even more how this goes, what effect it has on an individual, a child, what a long-lasting effect. This awareness that you were not safe, that they could neglect you in that way. That they can pin the guilt on you, that you are the one who is responsible for their depression. That your parents literally emotionally abuse you. It's your fault your child is ill with cancer. Get rid of those kids because I'll have too much to do ... These things are incomprehensible ... I came into contact with pain. I have felt it in this process now. That I can say to this, no, mum, I'm not having it. You won't put anything like that on me.'*

A third interviewee said: *'I have gradually stopped this [rescuing my father]. Now that sounds like I don't care. I do care, but we can't do anything if my father won't do anything, if he's not prepared to do anything. He was being treated, but didn't follow through with it. I hope he does now. But it's his decision.'* A fourth participant said: *'During the AEQ programmes I had a major conflict with my father. Therefore, we don't speak because it bothers him that I'm speaking now – that is, I started answering back more and sticking up for myself.'*

On the other hand, some participants mentioned that they had begun to take **greater responsibility for their own emotional response in relationships** after taking part in the AEQ programmes.

For example: *'About six months ago I got the feeling that I would like to have a partner again. And then came the feeling that he would leave me. I still have a lot of things to sort out in this regard. I'm not good enough for someone to want to be with me. And that feeling of being abandoned. That vulnerability. I'm scared of closeness, I daren't open myself up. I still need to do a lot of work on that.'*

**Being aware of wounds from the past, and recognising one's triggers and defence mechanisms** also led to **less impulsive reactions** and **efforts to react differently in future**.

*'I'm quicker to notice this process now and know how to sort it out. And it gradually happened that while the initial trigger still comes, the whole process is shorter. I am projecting, blaming and letting it out less and less. Now I direct my attention inwards and analyse this feeling, when it comes, and ask myself where it's come from. Then I react less, and also accuse and criticise less. So I take this responsibility, because it's in me. He's just some figure here. And then you try to get over the situation in a mature and adult way. It gradually gets better.'*

Another participant said: *'Yes, mainly this irritability and arrogance ... I go with the flow differently and then also react differently in these relationships. Sometimes I'm caught by surprise and I fall back into it. But then I say, ok, next time I'll get closer so that I can express this in a different way before it happens. I view it in a more conscious way.'*

Taking responsibility for one's own feelings and behaviour also created a space in which the desire for a child could emerge. *'I have to say that I am very happy that we didn't have a child before. If I look at it now, I would have messed him up completely. Now I've begun to think about it a bit more. Maybe that's what spurs me on ... I'm sure I'm in a position to bring him up better than my parents did me. I didn't use to want to have children.'*

The analysis showed that some individuals were better able to **take responsibility at a cognitive level** by the time they were interviewed – for example, taking responsibility at a cognitive level for excessive alcohol consumption and its impact on the family. *‘When I went skiing, or on multiple occasions through all these events ... I liked to drink, so I was drunk a lot of times. Quite considerably too much. Now this drinking has gradually become something I don’t like as much. I used to think it was cool to be wrecked. Now I think “Fuck, what are we doing to ourselves?” And I’m destroying the family.’*

This participant also took responsibility at a cognitive level for past behaviour in his partner and parental relationships. *‘Yes, I think I’m still trying to work that out. And I’m still trying to get to grips with how much I messed up, how I behaved to my family and my wife. Let’s say, I have always, even now (more or less) put the company first. It says everything about how much time I give to the company, how much to the family and how much to my wife. Although I always said, and the people around me always said, you really take a lot of time for your wife and family. And I said: She’ll take care of the family, I’ll sort out the company. Now, as the children grow up, it’s clear how much they are not ok in certain areas.’*

One of the participants said: *‘Now I know precisely what was going on in my marriage. How I came from home. Regarding my family ... How we were together. He was exactly the right person for me. But when I look at it now ... Terrible. I get it all now. But it’s really painful, when I see all the mistakes I made, or what I didn’t do. I have to work on that.’*

In tackling the challenges brought about by an awareness of their own responsibility, the participants highlighted the **desire to change their behaviour** and the **confidence they had in their power to do so**. For example: *‘Now, through AEQ, I believe in it, although I have not changed anything drastically yet. Just small things. But I do believe it can be changed and I have the desire to change it.’*

One participant talked about taking **excessive responsibility** and the impulse to resolve others’ problems after participating in the AEQ programme, although it is important to point out that she did also stress that **she was aware that it was in no way her responsibility**, i.e. she was aware at the cognitive level of the need to demarcate responsibilities, but that the internal impulse was still strong.

*‘Now I have a serious need to help people not take the path I have been on. I know that you shouldn’t do this, that you proceed step by step. That I shouldn’t be telling someone what I now know and accept. Because it’s too much ... And now I would like an article that sums everything up ... And I would send it because I reckon this person needs it and so does that one. But they’re not yet ready for that at all. I know all that, but the impulse is so strong. Now, when I can’t be as active, I try and solve things in another way. And I try not to.’*

## 2.1.5 PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Table 6: Frequency of statements relating to patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
Situation before AEQ												
Adverse patterns of behaviour	3	5	0	5	4	0	2	3	4	1	4	31
Positive patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Situation after AEQ												
Negative patterns of behaviour	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Positive patterns of behaviour	9	3	1	8	8	0	4	2	1	1	1	38

### 2.1.5.1 Situation before AEQ

Analysis of the interviews showed that most participants (nine of the eleven) identified numerous negative patterns in their own behaviour in intimate relationships before attending the AEQ programmes. These negative patterns were mentioned 31 times.

Among the most common pressures they described were **problems with setting boundaries** (nine of the eleven participants said that they had encountered them). This had led to a lack of differentiation in their partner relationships or problems in expressing their own individuality.

Participants mentioned that **they did not know how to talk about their feelings and needs**. For example: *'In my relationship I didn't even use to have the possibility because I wasn't clear enough about what I felt and wanted'* or *'This powerlessness. I didn't know how to talk about this and express my feelings. Because at home, even when I was happy, things weren't ok. Which was bad ... crying and such, and then not. When I was in conflict with my ex-husband, I didn't know how to say it.'*

Some participants **did not know how to ask for help and show their vulnerability**: *'I didn't know how to ask for help before. I would pull myself together. Ok, I'm nagging, I'd rather be on my own.'* The inability to set boundaries therefore led to an **imbalance between giving and taking** or an exaggerated concern for their partner at the expense of their own needs. *'Even in partner and friendship relationships, there was this pattern of overgiving and neglect of oneself.'* This was connected at the same time with **avoidance or non-resolution of conflict**. One participant said: *'I always tried to remove myself when we had*

arguments' and *'When we were having problems, I didn't have the strength to resolve them. I solved them by being silent and we wouldn't discuss anything for a couple of days and the matter was put to one side.'* Another participant said: *'I didn't have that before, making up and talking after a conflict'* and *'I didn't dare say anything when I was in conflict with my ex-husband. He was also violent on one occasion. And I bottled it up. These grievances and this pain. And that I was being wronged.'*

In these contexts, another participant also described the feeling of losing herself. *'I lived for others, not for myself. I suppressed all possible pain, I suppressed myself.'*

In several cases this led to **grievances and the dysfunctional expression of one's own needs in the form of accusing the partner, complaining, making demands and uncontrolled anger**. For example: *'Often in my relationship with my partner I would work, work, work and store it all up so that I could throw out some blame, be resentful, or irritable or complain'* and *'I would shout and make demands ...'* and *'That irascibility, expectations, frustration, resentment, complaining. Not always, but these were the highlights ... Unnecessary.'*

In addition to problems expressing one's own individuality, several participants experienced considerable **challenges brought about by their partner's expressions of differentiation. They found it difficult to take their partner's difference**. *'There used to be a huge amount of impatience and irascibility. I guess that whoever created us was a comedian, putting together someone who does things very quickly with someone who does things more slowly. I finish something, then do five things while I wait for my partner to arrive from wherever she's arriving from so we can get going. I might have offended her earlier when I said ...'* **Criticism was also frequently used**, for example:

*'I never gave praise, every meal could have been a bit better ... It's fine, just ...'* and *'You look for mistakes in the other person and focus too much on their bad characteristics because you can't be happy.'*

Some participants also mentioned **not respecting their partner's boundaries**: *'If there was some kind of joke, I would occasionally go so far that no one found it funny anymore'* and *'I didn't understand, no. I kept pushing and pushing.'* Not respecting boundaries also manifested itself as **non-acceptance of a partner's influence** or an **inability to listen and to accept one's own features that bother or hurt a partner** (*'I never wanted to hear those things that my partner would repeat to me'*) and as **expressions of control** (*'Yes, I used to always need constant control'* and *'Then fear and supervision and control'*).

The analysis showed, alongside a lack of inner resources for emotional self-regulation, that some participants were unable to take responsibility for their own feelings and behaviour. One of the participants talked about **violent outbursts**. *'There was always lots of drama in the relationship ... Then I didn't want to go on ... Gradually I gave up because I didn't want situations like that anymore, because there was physical violence as well. We were physically aggressive to each other ... You argue quite a bit when you're emotionally immature ... Quite a bit.'*

Another participant highlighted his **expectation that his partner would regulate his outbursts of rage**. *'When something completely threw me off the rails and I exploded ... and I needed someone to calm me down, my partner had completely the opposite reaction. She knew exactly how to make me angrier. Like pouring petrol on the fire. And we were never able ... I was never able to explain that at that moment, when I was like that, I needed someone to bring me back down to earth. Maybe ... I don't know, if someone knew how to, they could have ... It's just that she had those patterns from her family, which were very similar to what I was experiencing. And she was not even aware of it. And that was what bothered me the most.'*

Another participant described something very similar: that her inability to express her needs led to **expectations that her partner would intuitively recognise and take care of her needs**: *'Sometimes I wouldn't say anything because I felt that someone should already know. There was a lot of that. Not saying anything and having expectations, because it seemed to me that things were obvious.'*

Another participant discussed how she calmed the emotional distress of missing closeness through sex in relationships where there was no commitment or emotional security. *'When that feeling of missing and longing for closeness came, I would send messages. Even though I wanted closeness, a partner, basically I was also sending messages simply for sex.'*

One interviewee also addressed the **dynamics of co-dependence or assumption of the role of a partner's saviour**: *'Sometimes I used to want to save everyone, even if they didn't want it.'* Two others were led by a deep feeling of worthlessness **into a constant search for external confirmation of their own worth** and to **persisting in a relationship despite the presence of violence**. *'In fact this criticism is a feeling of not belonging and a feeling that I am a nuisance. That I actually don't belong. That I'm not part of the family, that I'm surplus to requirements. And then every criticism basically said, see, you're not good enough to be here. And I closed myself in and suffered. And when this flame was alight, I was thinking, ok, I'll be better, I'll be like this. And then I blame myself. At school and at music school ... I will be the best there and then the whole world will be better. It was the same with my husband, at the start all that romance, then this search for a feeling of belonging, even in his family.'* Another participant said: *'I am not irresponsible, but I didn't see that at the time. I have this thing where I'm not good enough and that I can be happy if I have someone. Because he's the only one who wants me. And he played on that. And that got me so wound up that I said: "That's true. I am where I am because I'm useless".'*

In relationships in which there was violence, there was also the taking of excessive responsibility and an **attempt to find reasons for a partner's violence outbursts in themselves**. For example: *'He called me and asked me why I had given the children two pairs of socks, not three. And that they were in one pair the whole weekend. It was with stuff like this that he messed with my head. But I didn't know how to sort this out. He was shouting and I was constantly asking myself what I had to do to make it stop.'*

One of the participants highlighted **withdrawal from her partner relationship into work and hobbies** as one of the problems she had before participating in the AEQ programmes.

*'A huge amount of time would go into the company and, when not, into cycling, walking and skiing. All of these things were the priority.'*

The analysis showed that none of the participants in the study made particular mention of positive patterns of behaviour in partner relationships, although, as we show in the next section, one of them did highlight a strengthening of the relationship as a positive change, which means that the important foundations were already in place.

### 2.1.5.2 Situation after AEQ

Most of the participants in the study (ten of eleven) identified positive changes in themselves with regard to their behaviour in partner relationships following participation in the AEQ programmes (discussed 38 times).

Seven participants highlighted a **greater ability to set boundaries**, which had led to **greater differentiation in the relationship**. For example: *'But I am so self-assured and my own person. That I react clearly, that I know what I feel.'*

These participants were able to **set and maintain their boundaries** (stand behind what was acceptable to them and what was not, and what they needed). For example: *'Not even my ex messes me around anymore. Because I've set some boundaries. He has sensed them and leaves me alone. So then I arrived at some self-esteem. If you set some boundaries, these people stop "fucking" with your head.'*

**The ability to express one's feelings and needs reduced uncontrolled outburst of anger:** *'Why would I store it all up for some future shouting match? If I can say it, I can say it. Nip it all in the bud. I have less of this bad energy, and if I find myself succumbing to it, I know how to stop it.'* **At the same time they were able to effectively use the energy of their anger to change the situation:** *'When he crossed the boundary in communication, respect ... I would let my anger out. But all controlled. That is, I strategically decided where I wanted to come with this conflict.'*

One of the participants also highlighted the fact that she had begun to realise how **important selectivity was in relationships when there was no reciprocity or balance between giving and taking**. She expressed this in the following way: *'Because now I say to myself: Ok, it will be much easier for me to accept the situation. To a certain extent, of course. What I want to accept. If someone doesn't want to answer me or if they don't want to be with me. OK, fine. That's your decision. I accept that. But then I'm more convinced in myself, then I won't give more energy to it anymore. I will also do that. Because it must be mutual for something to work.'*

Another person found it **much easier to show vulnerability and ask for help after AEQ** (*'I have learned to express what I need'*), while a third began to set boundaries with their family of origin, which strengthened her partner relationship (*'A step forward has certainly been made in my partner relationship. That this primary family has established itself where it is. You know, this is my mother ... This relationship keeps coming out through lots of conversations. The more you know, feel and say, the more you're able to leave it at a distance and the less it affects you. We're even closer. We can discover even greater depths.'*

Four participants found it a **lot easier to accept their partner's difference or expressions of differentiation** after the AEQ programmes.

*'I used to hold back, but I don't do that anymore because I don't have anything to hold back. I'm better aware of how she works. And I understand that I can't expect, force or*



*demand anything. Because I know that change is not possible like that.'*

**A more positive relationship with the partner** emerged: *'It's easier in a relationship if you look at each other in a more positive light.'* This widening of attention made it possible to recognise the positive aspects of the partner. *'That feeling of them getting on your nerves. And then they get on your nerves as soon as you get up, when they open the fridge. And you don't say anything because you've said it a hundred times before. And then that gets on your nerves ... Then he turns the tap on and that gets on your nerves too. Then you're angry with them, unfairly so. I will say that in some way you can focus on other things. That the breakfast is good, stuff like that. I definitely don't focus on that so much but on other things.'* One interviewee stressed that after AEQ she was able to see her partner in a more integrated way. *'When I try to look back, my ex-husband did love me once, he wasn't all bad ... I didn't understand that he loved me.'*

After participating in the AEQ programmes, interviewees were able to **respect their partners' boundaries** (five of them reported this).

This manifested itself as **turning attention to themselves and focusing on working on themselves**, which in turn **relieved them of the expectation that their partner would change**. For example: *'What I have to do is work on myself, not force or make demands on her.'* It also manifested itself as the **ability to listen to the other person when they were setting their boundaries and not experiencing it as an attack**: *'My partner ... I find it easier to accept her stuff, although she would probably say the same about me. There used to be more pushback. I would deny it – or if I didn't show that denial, I would deny it inside. The things that used to irritate me a lot only irritate me a little or not at all. That impatience, how I behave towards her, how, as a man, I want to do things quickly, hard and technically.'* Respecting a partner's boundaries also meant an **absence of shouting, demands and complaints**: *'I would shout. I've kind of forgotten about that. Because it no longer happens. Because basically the other person doesn't need to do that to me. Because anyway I do it to myself' or 'There is a lot less irritability and frustration and complaining now.'* There was also noticeable practising of mentalisation: **reflections on the partner's experience or the incorporation of their perspective and consideration of how they were feeling**. *'When I thought about it later ... That ... Not so egotistically that I would only think about myself and about my feelings. But through AEQ I began to think about how others felt in my presence. And I was really ... The thing that hurt most was that my partner no longer felt happy in my presence. So we kind of became strangers to each other to a certain extent. We no longer laughed, the sex wasn't how it used to be ... Small things like that stack up until you're strangers to each other' or 'Now we take more time to move to the same rhythm, go cycling or for lunch or do the tidying up together.'* There was also a **greater ability to validate feelings**: *'The worst thing you can do is tell someone that they feel wrong. That is how he works. Whether he does anything about it now is up to him.'*

Two interviewees also highlighted the **importance of observing one's own internal response to a partner's behaviour and exploring the origin of that response**. This led to **self-regulation and to a more conscious response as opposed to an automatic reaction**. *'My partner is how she is. Not that she's slow. Far from it. She understands the world*

*differently to me and I began to observe myself. I could see myself. I noticed that I wanted us to go fast, because I didn't want us to go slow ... Because I know that she is slow, I want to get somewhere quicker because then I have time to do things slowly there. If I'm late arriving, I will be under stress. Because I don't want to be under stress there, I'm already under stress, although I'm also under stress anyway because I do everything quickly. So I noticed how I was always in a rush to get somewhere. I never thought to allow time, that it was a process' and 'What I recognise and am aware of is that if I don't annoy her, I'm not stressed out and when we get there, I can still decide whether I will be stressed out. That irritability ... I might not be now or then either. Even if we're not late. And I don't need to store it up so that I'll be irritated and she'll then be guilty.'*

Another participant described this process in the following way: *'There were loads of things that bothered me. For example, the fridge door was open and ... I began to look into it, think about it. They always told me: Close the fridge door. Probably because her mother told her, because they didn't have enough money for electricity, everything had to be kept to a minimum. Now these are just trivial things. I still get annoyed when she opens the fridge door, takes something out and leaves the door open ... And when leaves the tap running as she's cleaning her teeth. Things like that really used to bother me. Then I began to think about why they bothered me and to look inwards for the reason: Ok, it's just the water running. It's not the end of the world. I've begun to identify those things that bother me and above all why they bother me. Now there's quite a lot progress here. If she opens the fridge, I'll watch her and the trigger is still there. But not to the extent that I'll stop and close the door.'*

One of the participants said: *'Last time there was some anger on my partner's side and I found it interesting to observe myself.'* Now I have someone who loves me again. And he's angry with me. Then there's that *déjà vu* with my father, only I'm different. And his anger didn't scare me, didn't hurt me, I'm different ... My inner being reacts completely differently to this external pressure of anger.'

One of the participants, who experienced huge guilt and feelings of inadequacy during his emotional outbursts before the AEQ programmes, was able to **respond to himself in a gentler way** after the programmes in the event of emotional dysregulation **by accepting himself and paying attention to the internal contents** that he still had to process. *'It still occasionally gets out of hand, of course, but I see, yes, ok, I still have to process this or that.'*

The same interviewee also said that **there was less time between an unregulated emotional outburst and an expression of regret and an attempt to repair the damage**. *'I say sorry more quickly.'* *'But now, when I've caused problems, I first try and resolve, clear up, sort out. And to apologise in some way, which I didn't use to do.'*

Four people also highlighted changes in relation to accepting responsibility for their own behaviour or the ability to **acknowledge and take responsibility for the impact and consequences of their behaviour on their partner**. The first described it as follows: *'There's less ego. My ego rises less. I have a partner who really knows how to read me and*

*let's me know it. And yes, sometimes that's not nice. But she knows how to do it in a very gentle, humorous and witty way. I get less irritated by it. So I say: "Yes, ok, you're right." I don't roll my eyes as much anymore if something bothers me. I am more aware of my behaviour at all levels and in all consequences.'*

Another participant **acknowledged his aggressive behaviour and was able to reduce it.** *'I then started to realise it. That I was putting her down, I was really rude and rough, that I despised her and that I never did her justice. I wasn't aware of this at all before. During the programme I began to acknowledge this and then became much more attentive to what was going on. And I recognised that these things were true. They sometimes happen to me still, but a lot, lot less. I see, as does my partner, that there has been progress.'* The third participant, who used to run away from conflict before AEQ, reported **greater access to the energy required to resolve complications in a relationship.** *'Now I feel responsibility and have more strength to resolve things.'*

In addition to this, interviewees also expressed the following positive patterns of behaviour:

**Conscious expression of gratitude to their partner** (*'I try to respect what's she's doing more. I did respect it, but never used to show that I did. That's how it was for me ... I had been taught ... Maybe the feeling was that something was taken for granted. She also expected some praise for that. And if I had mentioned it more often, something nice would have happened more often too. So perhaps we've improved a bit in this regard'*), **more quality time**

**and conscious attention** directed towards the partner or more sharing of activities, which arouses interest and positive feelings (*'My attitude to my wife has certainly improved, making time and paying attention. Listening to her wishes ... Now I look at things differently and devote more time, quality time. Recently we were with a friend ... And she told him that her husband had changed a lot. I mean, there has to be something to it if she said this to someone else', 'We're interested in the same things, nature ... Things have started to change now, now we cook together ...'*), **more expressions of tenderness** (*'My relationship with my partner has also changed. Emotionally, physically, which is something I notice. And she expresses herself differently to me in turn. There have also been changes when it comes to sensuality, tenderness. There was that before, but it's not as raw as it used to be. The body is not as tensed up. None of that chronic tension and stress inside, so things go differently'* or *'That's the thing about tenderness ... My partner tells me I'm really rough on the outside. That has changed a bit. I'm not like that anymore'*).

One of the participants described the **experience of a new partner relationship that was healthy and safe** because it included open communication, conflict resolution, self-reflection on both sides, emotional availability and the space in which all feelings could be expressed. *'He does not do AEQ, but he's one of those rare people who does a lot of self-analysis. So it's worth talking to him again and seeing his feelings. He completely lets me in. That anger is still there and it's precisely for that reason that this relationship seems to me even healthier, because that feeling has to be there as well.'*

The following topics also arose and were evidence of positive patterns of behaviour: the **ending of a relationship in which violence was present**, as mentioned by one participant, **greater ability to regulate the fear that arises in a relationship** (*'In the meantime I've felt the fear of what if it doesn't work, but I've learned through AEQ to come up with a plan: Plan A, Plan B, Plan C. Ok, suitcases ... We're done, I'll explain to the kids.'*)

The analysis also pointed to a greater **ability to incorporate conscious observation within the process of choosing a new partner, which led to an ability to bring an end to the relationship when one realised that it was based on previous wounds** (*'I got to know a guy who was an interesting copy of my ex-husband. It was like I had to see once again whether I had learned anything. And I had. I quickly ended it'*) and an **absence of the impulse to resolve problems and change the other person** (*'Now it's me who's in first place. I'll happily help someone who comes to me for help, but I'll no longer push them to change.'*)

Three people reported during the interviews that after the AEQ programmes they were able to **recognise adverse behaviour in themselves, and realise its problematic nature, but that change had not yet fully materialised**. This was the result of an **imbalance between the time** devoted to work and the time devoted to their partner. *'For example, I have always, more or less, put the company first. Through all this, how much time I devote to the company and how much to my family and wife.'* **Unregulated outbursts of anger** were highlighted as another example of negative behaviour, although one person took full responsibility for it. *'There is a lot less irritability and frustration and complaining now. It still occasionally gets out of hand, of course, but I see, yes, ok, I still have to process this or that.'* The third example of problematic behaviour, one that had otherwise been greatly reduced even though the participant concerned still acknowledged it, was **aggressive behaviour in the form of ridicule and coarseness**: *'I then started to realise it: that I was putting her down, I was really rude and rough, that I despised her and that I never did her justice. I wasn't aware of this at all before. During the programme I began to acknowledge this and then became much more attentive to what was going on. And I recognised that these things were true. They sometimes happen to me still, but a lot, lot less.'*

## 2.1.6 PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR IN PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Table 7: Frequency of statements relating to patterns of behaviour in parental relationships

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Adverse patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	6
Positive patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Negative patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Positive patterns of behaviour	0	0	3	0	8	0	1	5	7	1	0	25

### 2.1.6.1 Situation before AEQ

Our group of 11 participants included seven parents. In the course of the interviews, three of them highlighted adverse patterns of behaviour to their children before participation in the AEQ programmes (mentioned a total of six times). None of them made particular mention of positive patterns in this period.

Adverse patterns manifested themselves as **problems accepting their children** (*'I remember the children getting on my nerves. It's horrible to hear it, but that was actually how it was, I remember ...'*), **physical and emotional absence** (*'I had a young family. First child ... I would be at the office until midnight. Doing the accounts, doing them again ... No problem'*), **failing to be emotionally attuned to a child** (*'When my daughter came along ... I think the two older children were already around ... I was once away for three days at a trade fair. Or four days. And the older one was five, six or seven. And on the third day she asked at lunch why daddy wasn't coming to eat. After three days she still didn't know that I wasn't at home. That is, even if I had been home ... I always laughed at that and made a joke of it, saying, look, how cool am I. But today I realise what mistakes were made throughout that whole period. That's how I always operated within the family. I didn't know any different, as there was none of this in my family.'*)

One of the participants mentioned **problems self-regulating feelings around her child** (*'When my son asked something, I shouted at him out of helplessness'*) and an **inability to take responsibility for her own feelings** (*'Basically I would run away. When I had a child, I*

*wasn't able to do that anymore. Even though, when things were difficult, I wanted to run away. I knew that I shouldn't. And that made it all the worse. I constantly wanted to go ... And then I froze, so I didn't feel like that anymore either. Whether I ran away or froze.'* Her children unconsciously worried about her unresolved feelings: *'Even though, if you were to see me, you'd think I was an exemplary mum. Everything for them, just walking around ... Friendly. However, what was in me was affecting them too. All that terror and fear, whether I would be able to survive. That I'm a bad mother. But they felt it and said it all the time, what a good mother I was and they thanked me.'*

#### 2.1.6.2 Situation after AEQ

The analysis showed that there were changes in the area of parenting after participation in AEQ programmes. Six of the seven parents identified certain positive patterns of behaviour in their relationship with their children (mentioned a total of 25 times).

We can condense these positive behaviours into three main groups, as set out below. They are: accepting a child and their individuality; providing a safe emotional haven for a child; and taking responsibility for one's own feelings, behaviour and unresolved issues.

Several participants talked about **accepting their children and their children's individuality** and needs. For example: *'Since AEQ, my children no longer get on my nerves. I would say ... This clear picture of my feelings is also a clear picture of my relationship with them. And that in turn gives them a clear picture of our relationship'* and *'And it's precisely for that reason that I want them to be themselves. And I encourage them to show that ...'* and *'My son has a big need to talk a lot. He knows a lot, but doesn't write very well. He has dysgraphia. He has this need to express his knowledge verbally.'* This acceptance has also expressed itself as supporting the son and empowering him to face and express himself. *'He wants so much to express himself and you just cut him off. I teach him: If you see that something's bothering you, stop and tell the other person. There's anything wrong with doing that.'*

One of the participants also mentioned **greater inner calm, which had enabled her to accept that her children had different rhythms and wishes**. *'What bothered others was my speed and frenetic activity. A lot, then more than something else. Now everything is a little calmer. I don't even say anything ... I don't tell them as much what to do. I'm less irritable. The family are happy that everything is less frenetic now. Before AEQ they couldn't take this constant pushing.'*

The second main group into which we can condense positive behaviours is the **provision of a safe haven for children**, something that was mentioned by both mothers and fathers. They highlighted **greater availability** to children in the form of time spent and time spent talking (*'I spend more time talking to my daughters and devote more time to them'*) and **greater emotional contact with their children** (*'There didn't use to be so much contact and*

openness. It was like ... a little more casual. But now it's really different between us. I think that this change in the relationship with my mother has had that effect. One daughter has begun to behave differently towards everything, really.' They also mentioned the **ability to be fully emotionally present with their children**: 'They've now stopped saying it. I'm with them.

Now I understand why they told me that. Because they constantly felt that I would rather leave. Because I really felt like that. I felt that I couldn't do it. That I would rather escape to India for a year. And they felt that and were constantly there saying, mum, it's good that you're with us blah blah blah. At that time I didn't understand it. How they felt that, even though I had never said that I would leave.' They also highlighted the **ability to be in tune with their children's emotional state and needs, and to talk sensitively about them** ('I actually feel a connection with my child. I know exactly how much he needs me and when. I feel him as he is and give him his freedom. Because these are four completely different characters. And what I didn't have was freedom, because I had to be likeable') and the **ability to accept their children's emotional expressions and not to take them personally** ('Now I allow it, but before I used to get angry ... Why aren't you respecting me? But that wasn't actually the case at all.').

The last main group of behaviours related to **taking responsibility for one's own feelings and behaviour and for resolving one's own emotional issues**.

Several parents pointed out that they acknowledge the **power of their influence on their children and were aware that they had to resolve their own emotional issues** if they wanted to relieve the burden from their children. Two participants said: 'I had to resolve a lot of things from the past. I know that everyone does what they can with the things they've been taught. But some things were not ok. And I say now, that things will be different at least with my parents' grandchildren. And it's important to me that I know it. That I can influence my son differently to how I did previously' and 'I do that because of them. That time when I was so burned out, when I said let me just die now, I said, when everything was so difficult ... Yes, I'm doing this for them so that they will have a better life. I let a lot of things go because of fear, patterns. I said, things won't be like that for them. It's the best thing to observe that with them. The effect of doing something for myself. There's no need for me to explain anything to them. Because it's obvious.'

Another participant also mentioned **accepting one's own imperfection** and understanding **parenthood as a relationship of constant growth and learning**: 'Not everything is always perfect. I'm also growing from communication with them, even with my seventeen-year-old daughter, who can turn the mirror on me in an instant. And that's also a challenge. Yes, this is what life is.'

**Attention to one's own bodily responses and an understanding of one's own emotional world** has enabled them to **take responsibility for their own feelings** and a **'clear' view of children without projection**.

'I would say that this pure, clear picture of my feelings is also a clear picture of my relationship with them. And with this they have a clear picture of our relationship' and 'Now I know I'm afraid of whether I'll be capable of doing it. I react completely differently

now. I know that that's that. It's been a part of me for a long time and will probably continue to be so. The body tells you. Now I know ... I have these patterns, this fear of survival. Because my parents were like that during the war ... And when there was a lack of things. I really do carry that inside me even though I do not want for anything. That's what I'm like ... When my son talks about trainers for 100 euros, it hits me as if he's said 1,000 euros' and 'I now know why it affected me so much. I know, feel, that all this is in me. That there's nothing wrong with them. They have also calmed down a lot because I have too.'

This also contributes to a **greater ability to balance one's own feelings effectively**. 'In my anger towards my kids, I used to be more frustrated and angry if something got broken. Now I feel, when I get angry, especially with my daughter ... that I have more time in my head to think' and 'Just when I'm at my lowest point, they'll start bugging me. I know that now. And notice it myself. Ok, that's got you going now. But why has it got you going? I'm not entering that drama. So then I go and have a think. And I come back to my family. How they are basically me. They show me the same. Now I don't go for that drama at all. It doesn't get to me as much. I don't shout anymore, say things like no, that's not right, listen to me. I observe a bit, leave it and calmly say: This is what I think' and 'The calmer, more chilled out and more stable you are, the sooner you find the appropriate way to proceed ...'

Taking responsibility for one's own feelings and behaviour also manifested itself as **expressions of regret for pain caused and attempt to repair the damage**. 'I have changed a lot in relation to my children. Recently I realised that I was harming my middle son just as they had harmed me. After I apologised to him, I stopped behaving that way ... Things changed overnight. Literally. I stopped doing what I had been doing to them, even the unconscious things, and now everything is so much better.'

At the same time, that responsibility also manifested itself as **ensuring clear boundaries** during divorce: '... I arrived at it by steps. But again those calm steps. I remember the signing of the agreement at the notary's office, the interview with social services, at the court ... I remember I managed to do it all without any drama and get to the point where everything was sorted out peacefully. So that the children did not sense any great change. We did a lot of singing and dancing in the evenings. They were really relaxed.'

One of the participants acknowledged that she **trusted herself much more as a mother**: 'A lot, but also how I reacted to certain things ... Now it's completely different. I would go to my son's parents' evening and they would talk about his behaviour, that he was like this or that ... I wasn't someone who would judge whether it was ok now. If they said so, then it had to be. Now I look at it completely differently. I teach him the right things.'

Another participant said that when she takes responsibility for her own feelings and behaviour, **she's giving an example to her children of how to deal responsibly with problems in life**.

'I see that as a big plus for them growing up, because I've given them an example. My children are now 17, 15, 13 and 12. I have prepubescent kids. I look at it positively when I hear the words "I'll sort it out". He had something at school, some meltdown ... But the response to a problem ... That's it for me. He has a problem, he will sort it out. I would say



*that they've lived it through my example. In the end, that's what life's about.'*

## 2.1.7 PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR AT WORK

Table 8: Frequency of statements relating to patterns of behaviour at work

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G	Participant H	Participant I	Participant J	Participant K	TOTAL
<b>Situation before AEQ</b>												
Adverse patterns of behaviour	1	1	1	0	2	0	6	3	5	2	4	25
Positive patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Situation after AEQ</b>												
Adverse patterns of behaviour	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	4
Positive patterns of behaviour	9	2	4	4	3	0	2	3	1	4	4	36

### 2.1.7.1 Situation before AEQ

#### *Negative patterns of behaviour at work*

The majority of participants (nine of eleven) experienced pressure at the workplace prior to their participation in the AEQ programmes, and identified negative patterns in their behaviour (mentioned 25 times in the interviews). These patterns of behaviour can be divided in terms of content into four main groups: an inability to take responsibility for one's own needs; the search for external validation, leading to overgiving and perfectionism; an inability to express one's authenticity and set boundaries with colleagues; and difficulties with emotional self-regulation and expression.

The **inability to take responsibility for one's own needs** manifested itself as an **inability to take care of oneself and set boundaries to oneself**, which led to overwork and burnout. For example: *'If I look back ... I've been overburdened with things to do for 20, 30 years. I do too many things in one hour. I say to myself that I'll do this thing for ten hours. I do that in every area of my life. Overwork, burnout, constantly being tired. I didn't have any physical damage, but I had problems nevertheless. Organising my time and being overburdened.*

It also manifested itself as **inadequate care for one's body and mental health by not**

**taking rest or holidays and insisting on working through illness:** *'I did everything quickly, so quickly I would be dripping with sweat. I also wouldn't take sick leave. I went into work sick so that people would think I was a good worker. Basically, I shut up and did my work.'* Another participant said: *'I didn't use to take my holiday allowance'*, while a third said: *'In 2015 we strengthened the sales team and began to go to trade fairs abroad. I was with this guy who was the head of foreign sales ... It was just the two of us abroad. Just before Covid we had 20 fairs lined up for that year. We would have been visitors at some of these fairs, but that would have meant 150 days a year away from home. And just before 2019 we were at fairs abroad. Ten days, twenty. We came home and he was ill for a week. Virus, cold ... He was laid low with the flu. I came home in the evening, sorted everything out, then at seven the next morning my foot was on the pedal again. Then it was all over the team: "Look, they've all been felled by this but he's still standing". No pain, no concessions.'*

Another interviewee also mentioned **fluctuating between overgiving** at work and **being too little involved and not sufficiently committed:** *'There was this pattern of overgiving and then I began to neglect myself. From one extreme to another. Then it went in the other direction and I began to give too little. I always worked, but the energy was not right'* and **persisting in a job despite chronic dissatisfaction:** *'I was chronically dissatisfied at work. When I was a lot younger, I was more dynamic, active, energetic. I had a job in cardboard manufacture and it was always repetitive and hard physical labour. Because I didn't feel my body, I persisted. I also didn't have a great deal of choice, given that I didn't have much of an education. I always ended up doing physical labour and gave too much of myself. That drains you and you can't be happy. Then you don't work with heart and passion'* or *'There used to be worry and fear about money. Grandma was also hungry because they did not have any. All that panic and work ...'*

Several people also highlighted the **search for a feeling of worth in overgiving:** *'When I was giving so much at work, it was a good feeling, because giving is nice. But I was driving myself to get that approval and love I wasn't getting at home. To my own detriment'* and *'It was only through work that I tried to get myself to the point that I would be worthy of love from anyone. The feeling that I was less worthy than others, that they were more successful than me.'* That could also lead to **perfectionism.** *'I would think about some trivial thing for a week, how it could be improved ... I had the feeling that I had to know everything that was written down by heart. I didn't dare let myself read anything. I already knew every statement by heart. I would prepare and commit everything to memory, it was excessive, really excessive. I thought this was something completely fundamental.'*

More than half the participants (seven of eleven) highlighted as the biggest problem the **inability to express authenticity and set boundaries for colleagues.**

They were therefore unable to **express their needs and desires:** *'I didn't know how to stand up for myself. To fight for something from my superiors. I couldn't do it. I was "the good girl" again, just like at home. Whatever they said, it was "yes, yes". I didn't know how to say no, because I could lose my job'* and *'I found it really difficult to ask for and say something.'* They were also **unable to be authentic:** *'From the outset they took me to be a gentle, friendly, incompetent, meek little girl. I really used to be like that. I would swallow a*

*lot, feel bad and not react in the right way' and 'I didn't use to be so mature that I could say to them: "You are not working for the team, you're not working ok". No. I was waiting for the Covid situation, some external situation ... I don't know where this fear of someone saying something horrible to me came from' and 'If someone came in complaining about their salary, I would quickly give in.'*

One participant linked their feelings of inauthenticity and the **need to please others** to a constant feeling of inadequacy. *'AEQ helped me think about where this feeling that I'm not good enough, even as an employer, came from. As a manager and director, I'm always trying to accommodate all my employees. I organise team-building events, picnics, Christmas gifts, annual leave allowances and holidays, but in the end I always have the feeling that it's not good enough.'*

Three participants also mentioned **taking on excessive responsibilities**, for example: *'I used to have some agreements set out over several pages, for example. Something had been agreed but did not appear in the agreement. It didn't. There wasn't time for this or that. So I would take it upon myself to do it all. I'll do that myself. I'll be giving to others that way.'* Another participant described her **inability to delegate tasks** as follows: *'At my age I should be an adviser, a teacher, not the main worker. I should be the manager, have this many workers, attend to management matters in my own way, not the main worker and the cleaner in my own company. But I do all those things.'*

Such behaviour might be accompanied by her own **minimisation of the situation** (*'God knows if I could have done this sooner. I would say to myself, be a little patient, it's nothing serious'*) or by **resentment at experiencing injustice** (*'I didn't know how to say no. All this injustice and resentment would be boiling up inside me. Why should I have to do this much and others not.'*). One participant would react in an **aggressively defensive way** to this inability to set boundaries and these feelings of threat, which would then be followed by an **apology**: *'Basically, because I'm the boss, if it wasn't done my way, I would demand that it was. Then I would apologise if I had that kind of meltdown.'* Another interviewee said that before AEQ she was unable to stop **her boundaries from being crossed and her sexual integrity from being compromised**: *'I started off very meek and he exploited me sexually as well.'*

The last group of adverse behaviours at the workplace was linked to **problems with emotional self-regulation and emotional expression** in relationships with employees or clients.

One participant highlighted problems with expressing her emotions (*'I didn't know how to express my feelings. I was a good employee, they all praised me'*), while another mentioned his **unsympathetic** attitude towards the children he worked with and was a reflection of his own response to himself: *'I used to be quite hard towards them. Just kick the ball. Do this and that.'*

### *Positive patterns of behaviour at work*

The analysis showed that despite the fact that several participants mentioned positive characteristics and patterns of behaviour on the part of others prior to participation in AEQ programmes (e.g. diligence, reliability, responsibility, persistence, hard work, helpfulness, availability), they did not highlight their own positive patterns of behaviour for that same period. These characteristics were, as we can see from the above statements, expressed as extremes and at the expense of their own genuine needs, feelings and desires.

### 2.1.7.2 Situation after AEQ

The analysis showed that a large majority of participants (ten of eleven) identified numerous positive patterns of behaviour in the workplace context after the AEQ programmes (mentioned a total of 36 times). These were manifested in five areas, as follows: responsibility for one's own needs or care for oneself; the absence of a constant search for external validation; the ability to set boundaries; better regulation of feelings (which leads to better communication and relationships); and work as a creative experience that involves meaning and pleasure.

Four people talked about **taking responsibility for their own needs and looking after themselves**. After taking part in the AEQ programmes, one participant recognised his procrastination as a conscious decision stemming from attending to his own needs and not from fear of imperfection: *'When I procrastinate now, I do so more consciously.'* Four people also mentioned that they were **able to stop (tell themselves no) and break the vicious cycle of exhaustion**, which, as can be seen in the following case, released energy for tackling other challenges: *'I don't rush around doing so much now ... That vicious cycle has been broken. If someone says, let's go and do that, I say maybe not. Because I don't need it. Why would I do that now. I know how to say no. I've also got more energy now and can use it to deal with certain things.'* In relation to this, other participants said: *'For the last six months, since AEQ, I have been so tired that I really can't do it. I say: I'm not going'* and *'I've basically stopped, and I'm still stopping. When I work too much, I'm aware that I'm working against my own interests'* and *'I was stuck in this pattern until I slowly came to the point of saying, these jobs aren't for me, they're too physically draining.'*

The topic of **respecting one's own rhythm** also arose. *'Now this life coaching. I'm the one who decides and I don't need to work this many hours. I've gone in a completely different direction'* and *'Now I'm at home and I also work more slowly.'* Greater care for oneself has also led to greater satisfaction and energy: *'Now I work with pleasure and energy.'*

Another topic that arose was the **absence of a constant search for external validation** (mentioned by two people). One participant talked about how the **need for external validation had been replaced by a personal inner authority**: *'Such inner power came along. To see that this lecturer is not ... Even if it's a person from a professional institution. Why do I have to please him? The strength you get when you see that you don't agree with something or something seems illogical to you, you can say to yourself, I'm not going there.'* She was also **able to operate from authenticity, independently of colleagues' opinions**: *'... And maybe also of colleagues. Others are slightly more unimportant. No longer important. I don't care what they think. I used to be quite a bit more of an active, effective and driven teacher than most of the others. And if someone is more hardworking, in some ways they don't like it. Most of them want it to be easygoing, to do as little as possible. And then you spend time trying to impress somebody, but you end up doing your own thing and not caring what they think or do. I'm more aware now that I can work according to my own wants.'* Another participant had **reduced his perfectionism**: *'I'm not a*

*perfectionist or an impulsive person anymore.'*

The third topic, which was discussed by seven people, was the **ability to set boundaries**. One interviewee highlighted the fact that, owing to greater self-knowledge and awareness of her needs and desires, she was more effective in setting boundaries: *'I find it easier to say no now, I stand up for myself. At the same time, I know more precisely what I want, what I have and what I am. I find it easier to stand behind my own priorities. I give priority to myself and my own time. I saw that the benefits I would get from this would be less than having to suffer by having to listen to some nonsense or other.'*

Another participant **felt able to leave someone who did not take responsibility and was not contributing to his company**: *'His work began to get worse and worse. There were more and more mistakes. He had so many problems. And I began to look into his background. What his family was like, what problems it had. And there were so many things that I wasn't able to solve them for him. I had to draw a line and say, I'm not some sort of sponge. Being overwhelmed by others' daily problems ... I said to myself, I can't take it anymore. He wouldn't be able to pour all this bad energy over us anymore when he was with us.'*

A third person was able to **stick up for herself**: *'Then, from year to year, I stood up for myself so much. I had been prepared to give up, but I stood up for myself. I would never have believed it was possible.'* Two other participants were **able to maintain boundaries with colleagues**: *'Now I set boundaries. It's hard work. I also say, it's not like we can choose' and 'I'm better able to put myself first. Now I say no, I won't do it anymore. Now that younger colleague knows. He says, I'll work, you just go home. Now it's 11 o'clock, you can go. I convinced them that I couldn't do any more work.'*

Several participants reported that they were able to **set boundaries to clients**. *'Now I say, I can't. I also turn down clients. And I say, no, they're not important. I don't have a guilty conscience about that. And if someone criticises me, that's their problem, how they deal with it' and 'If they accept it, fine, if they don't, go elsewhere [...]. One woman went completely mad when I refused to give her antibiotics. I explained why I don't give antibiotics to animals if it's not necessary. She replied: "We've done it before [...]. These are everyday things." I stopped her and said: "You're right. I deal with these things, I know what I'm doing. Take it or leave it"'*

Two interviewees also highlighted a **greater ability to cede control and delegate tasks**: *'I also let other people do things, not just me all the time. It used to be the case that if anyone asked me, I would be on it straightaway. Now it's like: aha, ok, fine. Others will do it, I don't need to, thank God' and 'I better understand that I don't have to do so much, it will have to be given to someone else or it won't be done. I should slowly take less upon my own shoulders.'*

The next major area in which changes occurred was **better self-regulation of feelings**, which had a positive impact on workplace relationships (four people reported this).

As one of the interviewees described it, this was linked to **greater self-reflection** enabling them to **acknowledge their difficulties regulating their feelings** and begin to **take responsibility for themselves**: *'The thing that bothered me the most was when I recognised that caustic tone in my voice, a tone I would never want to hear from my own superior. That was also what they used to say to me at home. My father was always: Not like that. Instead of saying: Look, not like that, let's do it this way. Everything was cutting and to the point. He would completely destroy and knock the wind out of you. I began to realise this more and more, and I saw that I would have to change my own behaviour if I wanted to keep people around me and have them follow me in this business.'*

Better self-regulation of feelings had led to **fewer conflicts** (*'The biggest progress is that I've calmed down a bit. That I think about something beforehand before saying anything. That I don't embark on some silly conflict that isn't necessary, for example'*) and to **more respectful communication on both sides** (*'Management also behaves better, one of the reasons being that I behave differently. They also used to respond to me angrily, raise their voices ... Now we basically listen to each other, choose our words more carefully and address each other in a nicer way. No more of that shouting. I listen to them more and they listen to me more. So communication is completely different.'*). At the same time, better self-regulation has also led to **greater presence during discussions and less need for control** (*'There has been a great change in how I express myself to others and to clients. More silence in the head. There's simply no need to think so much, make a fuss, control everything'*), and the **ability to cooperate instead of making demands**, which previously came from feelings of being under threat (*'Now I don't demand, I offer the possibility of a solution. Or we cooperate and I don't apologise, even if it means occasionally saying things I don't agree with.'*).

In the case of unregulated feelings, one of the participants was able to **take responsibility and to apologise**. *'Children can draw a lot of things out of you, including anger. They don't listen, don't do things ... Everything's flying all over the place. But as far as I'm concerned, it's great. I was shocked one day when a little girl managed to draw quite a bit out of me. I had to acknowledge my own responsibility ... How I had crossed the line. I apologised to the mother and girl immediately.'*

The analysis also showed a **greater ability to mentalise** (thinking about and understanding the mental and emotional states, one's own and those of others, that have led to certain behaviour). This has opened up the possibility of greater self-regulation: *'For example, someone said to me, look, if it's not going to happen like this, you'll have to get used to it. I was really offended by this. You can't get used to it. I have to find a solution. How she was able to say that I have to get used to it. I said to myself: Well, she does the same. Everything hurts her but she's kind of got used to it. She's at that stage when she doesn't feel that much and ignores things. If that's what she does to herself, of course she shouldn't be telling me different. Now I can see these types of people. How they operate, what their priorities are. Of course, I can't follow and consider their suggestions as I once would have' and 'I understand them. They see me as I am and think that I will easily do it, as I used to do – quickly and well. No waiting around.'*



Together with accepting and being kind to oneself, mentalisation also brought **more empathy towards others**: *'Just as I look at myself differently, so I look at others differently. I don't demand from them as I used to demand from myself. I see, aha, hmm, look, if I'm like that, where are they? There's more of this empathy and understanding. Which I used to have, but now on a physical level as well, which I used to simply overlook. I'm much softer, better at perceiving things ... I'm better able to understand why someone can do something, why another might not be able to, why they sometimes can't do something. So in this way. Not robotically, but with the objective of what needs to be done. It's more like, ok, they can do this now, in this way, this other thing not at all ... The boundaries have been set and taken into consideration differently. Paying attention to yourself, your body.'*

The last major topic that we identified in the analysis was **experiencing work as a creative experience that involved meaning and pleasure** (discussed by seven people). One participant felt that she had managed to **expand her understanding of responsibility** after experiencing the AEQ programmes (*'I'm now able to perceive it in a wider sense. I condition this responsibility, not only with the seriousness that was interpreted as responsibility. Now it's more important to me whether something is effective, meaningful or flexible. AEQ showed me that, delivered it to my mind'*) and **replaced seriousness with what was meaningful and necessary** (*'I've mainly let go of this seriousness, which was very bound up with responsibility. I've softened it up, relaxed it, put it to one side. And I take responsibility that is meaningful and necessary. Only in a vicious cycle is seriousness meaningful and necessary.'*). This person had also managed to arrive at **better and more creative solutions**: *'Now I give different solutions. I don't explain as much. I get to, locate and connect the point much more quickly. Simpler, more fluid, more efficient.'*

As two participants showed, care for oneself also brought **greater concentration and improved quality of work**: *'Although I used to do more than I do now, what I do is of higher quality, my mind is more in it. It's different. There is a big difference'* and *'It's better to do less because the end-result is better. You get much more out of it.'*

The **aspect of pleasure** was extremely important for four of the other participants. One of them began to take **decisions based on pleasure and positive feelings** at work after the AEQ programmes, rather than on an exaggerated feeling of responsibility and duty, as she used to do. *'I also observe myself more at work. I do what pleases me. What I don't have to do, what doesn't please me, I just say "I'm not doing this". I seek out things that I will enjoy doing. Look for ... I really enjoy working on projects. You can be very free. And I go to the theatre or do something creative. Or we have something to eat and talk about stuff. And these events and people come along and I say to myself: Yes, I like doing that. I don't like marking school-leaving exams. And I said: I'm not going to mark any school-leaving exams. I'm successful, I don't earn a lot of money, teachers are knackered at the end of the school year, why would I do any extra work? I don't get any pleasure from it, nor money, so why? I don't need to do it. I won't learn anything new.'*

Another participant now **ensures that she enjoys herself and rests by taking regular time off**, something she never made full use of before: *'I go on holiday for a week with my partner in May now.'*

One interviewee **identified her vocation and began to actively pursue it**: *'AEQ opened me up to coaching. This job was one of my biggest wounds. I'm also looking forward to the future, for the first time, because I had been searching so long for something I would like to do. Because the doors were closed to me, because I was all cramped up inside. Now I've opened myself up and a career has opened up for me as well. A real spiritual vocation. Because when you do your vocation with heart, you become more likeable and have a positive effect on the people around you. What a world it would be if everyone did the same.'*

Two participants pointed out that they had managed to **get in touch with their feminine energy and begin to work from it** after AEQ: *'I can really feel my femininity now. At work I've managed to withdraw a bit more so that I'm not so responsible. I also feel that I allow myself to be gentler. Quieter. But now it's different. I used to be submissive, now I'm not' and 'Now I feel that another period of life has started, when I will be able to see how things have changed. I now think there will be some integration. I will have more feminine energy. I could not rely on men before and was all about masculine energy. The main touchstone for me has to be my feminine energy. Since AEQ everything has slowed down and I have gained this new experience that has helped to regain my balance.'*

#### *Adverse behaviour at work*

The analysis showed that, in the period following the AEQ programmes, two participants described adverse behaviour at the workplace, but both were able to identify it and take responsibility for changing it. One of them highlighted the fact there was still a **need to please** on her part and that the AEQ programmes encouraged her to think about it and look for its origin. *'AEQ helped me think about where this feeling that I'm not good enough, even as an employer, came from. As a manager and director, I'm always trying to accommodate all my employees. I organise team-building events, picnics, Christmas gifts, annual leave allowances and holidays, but in the end I always have the feeling that it's not good enough.'*

**Overwork and difficulties setting boundaries for oneself** were other examples of adverse behaviour that periodically arose with both participants (even though they also mentioned the changes they had been able to make). The first said: *'If I look back ... I've been overburdened with things to do for 20, 30 years. I do too many things in one hour. I say to myself that I'll do this thing for ten hours. I do that in every area of my life. Overwork, burnout, constantly being tired.'* Another participant described her overwork, after which she took a holiday (which was a positive change for her), as: *'I worked like a dog.'*

**Difficulties effectively setting boundaries** was the last remaining pressure mentioned: *'Now I have one example of such a person, one who's been with us for many years. I see that he is emotionally immature. He has big problems, but is sort of a good worker. The moment there is a debate about relations and the way of working, I'm scared of approaching it with him. Whenever we start talking about it, there's a fight. There's no*

*build up to it. We start arguing at the beginning, straight off.'*

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that changes occurred in behaviour in all four areas that we looked at (relationship with oneself, in partner relationships, in parental relationships and at work) after participation in at least three AEQ programmes led by Aleš Ernst.

Starting with **attitude towards oneself**, which involved examining contact with and care for one's body, self-acceptance and attitude to one's own responsibility in relationships, we can conclude the following: After taking part in AEQ programmes, most participants reported the presence of awareness, or good awareness, of their body, in contrast to how they felt before the programme. While increased conscious direction of attention towards the body led to increased fatigue and pain perception, it also led to fuller experience of the body, a better awareness of the body's needs, a heightened awareness of bodily sensations in connection with specific emotions, a better demarcation between one's own emotions and those of others, and trust in the body as a 'compass' for decision-making.

It also led to changes as far as caring for one's body was concerned. After the programmes, most of the participants began to take greater care of their body. They began to pay attention to its abilities and limitations, afforded themselves more rest and managed their energy better. After the programmes they reported moving with greater gentleness and awareness, and seeking out movement for the purpose of positive feelings and a feeling of value. They also devoted more time to leisure activities. Some individuals began to pay greater attention to their body's needs (e.g. for food, when it was time to go to the toilet). They accepted pain with greater equanimity, no longer viewing it as a weakness but as a teacher that invited them to reflect and pointed them to the need to make changes. One of the participants reported that they were still experiencing problems taking care of their body after the AEQ programmes, specifically with regard to fatigue.

Experience of the AEQ method also brought positive effects in relation to self-acceptance.

More than half the participants reported that they did not accept themselves and had negative feelings towards themselves prior to the programmes. After the programmes, the same number highlighted the behaviours and feelings that came from accepting themselves.

They reported that the feelings of not being good enough, of inferiority, inadequacy or weakness had been replaced by an acceptance of their humanity, greater patience with themselves during processes of change, a feeling of worth and equality, pride in themselves and their growth, a sense of goodness in their essence and increased self-love. Some individuals also talked about greater self-respect and self-confidence, an increased ability to accept their own wishes and greater focus on their own needs. Some developed greater respect, sympathy and love for their own body, while one participant also highlighted greater experience, acceptance and expression of her femininity.

Another participant reported that she was still experiencing problems with self-acceptance after taking part in the AEQ programmes, which expressed itself as perfectionism.

There were also changes in the way one experienced one's responsibilities within relationships. Before AEQ, almost half the participants experienced themselves as powerless victims of adverse external situations and relationships. After AEQ, however, seven of the eleven participants began to experience a feeling of inner power and no longer regarded themselves as victims. This power enabled them to begin to express themselves more 'authentically', to trust themselves more, to accept their own needs and desires, and to set boundaries. They felt that they had more strength to change their lives and resolve relationship-related issues. One participant also experienced this power in a physical sense – that is, as an experience of feeling physically bolstered in stressful situations, which had, as a result, become more manageable.

Similarly, most of the interviewees had not known how or had been unable to take responsibility for their own feelings, needs and behaviour prior to the AEQ programmes. The analysis shows that this was the area in which the biggest changes occurred after participation in an AEQ programme, with all 11 participants reporting improvement. They had begun to feel that they were responsible for their own lives, were able to express their thoughts and feelings more clearly, and took responsibility for satisfying their own needs. They had also started to follow their own desires and interests to a greater extent and reduced the impulse to immediately respond to the needs of others. They were also able to accept help, which was something they had previously been unable to do. The analysis showed that they were able to separate their sense of worth from the opinions of others and began to expect joint responsibility in their relationships; when it was not there, they were able to set boundaries.

It was also noticeable that they took responsibility for the feelings that arose in their relationships. Acknowledging wounds from the past and recognising triggers had led to fewer impulsive reactions in relationships and greater efforts to react differently in future. Although all participants were not yet able to take responsibility at the level of behaviour, they acknowledged the need at a cognitive level and expressed a desire to change.

In the area of **intimate relationships**, most of the participants had had problems setting boundaries before AEQ. After the programmes, they were better able to do so, which led to more frequent expressions of their own individuality. They were able to express their feelings and needs to a greater degree, which led to reductions in uncontrolled outbursts of anger, and recognised the need to be selective in their relationships and to strike a balance between taking and giving. They also found it easier to express their vulnerability and ask for help.

Another area of intimate relationships in which changes occurred was in accepting a partner's difference. After attending the AEQ programmes, they were better able to accept that difference, acknowledge their own positive qualities and express gratitude.

Almost half the participants were also able to express respect for their partner's boundaries by turning attention to themselves and focusing on working on themselves. Some participants reported that they were able to listen to their partner when they were setting boundaries and not to see it as an attack. They were helped to do so by reflecting on their partner's experiences and considering their partner's perspective. Some also

reported that they had stopped expressing their needs by shouting, making demands and complaining, and that they were better able to evaluate their partner's feelings. The increased ability to mentalise developed through the AEQ programmes had also contributed to better self-regulation and helped them to respond consciously rather than simply reacting. They had also developed a softer and more sympathetic approach towards themselves, and were able to express regret and repair contact earlier. One participant was able to acknowledge and reduce their aggressive behaviour through the AEQ programmes, while two had begun to express more tenderness to their partner. Prior to the programmes, one participant had used work to escape from his relationship, but had now begun to give his partner more time and attention,

while another reported that she was now able to be more self-aware when selecting a new partner, and to bring a relationship to a close quickly if she realised that she had chosen a new partner on the basis of her past bad experiences. By working on herself, she had managed to experience a safe partner relationship, one that featured open communication, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional availability on both sides, and was a safe space for the expression of all emotions.

Three participants reported that they could still identify several adverse patterns of behaviour in their intimate relationships: occasional unregulated outbursts of anger, occasional aggressive behaviour in the form of ridicule and coarseness, and favouring time spent at work over time spent with their partner. All participants acknowledged the problematic nature of this behaviour.

The AEQ programmes also led to changes in **parental relationships**. These manifested themselves as accepting their child and their individuality, providing safe emotional shelter for their child (greater availability in the form of time spent together and discussions, greater emotional contact with their child, the ability to be emotionally present more fully, being more in tune with and responding more sensitively to their child's emotional state and needs, the ability to accept their child's emotional expressions rather than taking them personally), and taking responsibility for elements of their own emotions, behaviour and unresolved issues. Taking responsibility took the form of being aware of their impact on children and resolving their own emotional issues, being better able to balance their emotions, expressing regret for pain caused and repairing contact, ensuring clear boundaries are maintained after divorce, having greater trust in their mothering skills, accepting their imperfections, and providing role models on how to tackle problems in life in a responsible way.

As far as **relations at work** were concerned, participants were able to take greater responsibility for their own needs and to take care of themselves (able to say 'no' and break the vicious cycle of exhaustion) after attending AEQ programmes, and were no longer constantly seeking external validation; this had been replaced by an inner authority and led to feelings of greater authenticity. Their perfectionism had been reduced and they were able to set boundaries. They were also better able to balance their emotions, which had led to more respectful communications, fewer conflicts, an enhanced ability to

communicate and more empathy for others. A new area emerged, that of experiencing work as something creative that involved meaning and pleasure. One participant reported that she had replaced serious responsibility with meaning and necessity, which meant that she was able to come up with more creative solutions and improve the quality of her work. Some began to take decisions based on the pursuit of pleasure, their own interests and positive feelings. Many of the participants had begun to pay more attention to rest and time off, and the topics of identifying and following a mission and working from one's own feminine energy also emerged.

Two participants reported that they continued to recognise adverse patterns of behaviour in themselves after the AEQ programmes: the need to please, and occasional problems setting boundaries for themselves and for others.

The results outlined above show that the individuals who took part in our study identified important changes in their patterns of behaviour in all four research areas: behaviour to oneself, in partner relationships, in parental relationships and at work.

## 4. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

If further research is to be conducted, it would be advisable to include more participants so as to make the results more accurate and precise. It would make sense to divide participants into those who had taken part in AEQ group programmes exclusively and those who had attended one-to-one sessions. This would enable us to see whether there were differences in the changes brought about in participants' behaviour according to the form in which the AEQ method was delivered. It would also make sense to seek out participants who had not taken part in any psychotherapeutic or psychological treatment prior to or during the AEQ programmes, as this would enable us to examine the effectiveness of the method with greater precision. More precise data would also be obtained if the study was longitudinal, and the first interviews held with individuals prior to their first AEQ programme and last after the completion of three programmes.

This study has provided us with important insights into the changes in behaviour identified by participants of AEQ programmes led by Aleš Ernst (relationship with oneself, in partner relationships, in parental relationships and at work). Further research could examine each of these areas separately in order to obtain more in-depth information. The area of parental relationships in particular deserves more detailed examination, as it is currently the area that has received the least research attention. In that case, more detailed interviews would have to be conducted, perhaps across a greater number of sessions with each of the interviewees, and qualitative research combined with quantitative research.

## 5. REFERENCES

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