

## SUMMARY OF A STUDY EXAMINING CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR AFTER PARTICIPATION IN THREE AEQ PROGRAMMES

The aim of the study, which was conducted between April 2022 and March 2023, 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 relationships, as parents and at work.

The participants in the study 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) chose to take part in the study. Six of the participants (54.5%) had had experience of one-to-one as well as group sessions.

We collected data for analysis with the aid of a semi-structured interview designed for the purpose. All interviews were conducted via videolink. The sound was recorded and then transcribed for ease of processing. The interviews lasted for 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.

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, allowed 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.

Only one 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. As a result, these situations 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 showed 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 not all participants were 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. They also 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 participants 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 their 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 were 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.

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