
The Elar Institute: Developing Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness Through Connection

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Overview

Prioritizing and discussing mental health has become less stigmatized in recent years as more people educate themselves about their personal mental wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of others. This is especially relevant as people become more aware of the way their mental health impacts both their personal and professional lives. This study assesses the impact of The Elar Institute, a Central Florida-based nonprofit that aims to give its participants the tools and practice needed to gain control of their emotions and feelings, ultimately giving them control of their lives.

The Elar Institute offers online courses to people around the world that teach the connections between mindfulness, neuroscience, and nonviolent communication. Specific themes of Elar's programming include:

- Exploring a research-based curriculum integrating emotional intelligence, applied neuroscience, somatic practices, and mindfulness concepts.
- Learning an actionable framework and developing a practical toolbox to use when navigating conflict.
- Cultivating strength with an international growth-oriented community.

The data for our study comes from a community-based, participatory impact evaluation method called Ripple Effect Mapping (REM), which captures a community's shared impression of the broad impacts of a program—the “ripples” that represent system-wide impacts beyond the initial focus of a program or intervention. The key output of an REM session is a collaborative mind map created by community stakeholders that summarizes their collective view of the

program's impacts and benefits. We conducted two REM sessions, one with the Elar Institute's leaders, coaches, and staff in January, 2022 and a second with recent and current program participants in March, 2022. The results of our assessment are based on a thematic analysis of the collaborative mind maps, group discussion, and other artifacts of the mapping process. Five key findings emerge from our results:

1. Participants saw a drastic difference in their emotional intelligence after participating in the Elar program. Before, participants found it difficult to navigate feelings, needs, and conflicts in all aspects of their lives, while after they felt well-equipped to handle situations at work and in their personal lives.
2. Elar participants found it increasingly easier to be vulnerable in their circles, and respect the vulnerability of others. This acceptance of their feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others, emerged as a result of participating in the program.
3. Elar provides a space for people to connect, learn, and grow. Participants are able to talk with one another and talk about how they're feeling or what they're thinking without fear. Participants report building trust with other group members, as well as and learning to connect and promote growth within themselves.
4. Elar functions as an open and inclusive community. Participants are motivated by knowing that they're a part of something bigger. They're able to have inner communication as well as outer connection. That sense of inclusivity allows for all the participants to feel that they will be heard and not dismissed.
5. Elar's training helps elicit a great sense of healing, growth, and personal development within its participants that inspires them to find a sense of purpose by using what they have learned to benefit the lives of others.

Ripple Effect Mapping

Ripple Effect Mapping is a method of program evaluation which engages stakeholders to reflect and collaboratively map a program's history and impact. REM was originally developed in agricultural extension work to investigate the impacts of interventions on entire communities, particularly second-order qualitative effects that could not be easily captured through direct quantitative measures (Kollock et al., 2012). REM is simple, inexpensive, and capable of capturing complex interactions across distance and time. An REM session is also frequently motivating for the participants, and can be an effective way to reaffirm the values of a program or as a capstone marking the end of an implementation period.

An REM session is organized like an extended think-pair-share discussion activity and typically takes two to three hours to complete. In addition to the participants, who represent stakeholders in the program being assessed, there is at least one primary facilitator who manages the event and discussions, and one or two co-facilitators who assist with the group mind mapping portion of the session.

The session proceeds as follows:

1. The facilitator welcomes the participants, gives an overview of the process, and answers any initial questions. The research process and any uses of the data generated by the session are also discussed at this time; participants are asked to complete consent forms authorizing their participation before the session continues.
2. Participants consider and free-write individual responses to a short prompt. This first activity is intentionally open and is intended to stimulate reflection. There is no required format for the responses and participants can write as much or as little as they wish. (10-15 minutes).
3. Participants group into pairs and engage each other in structured interviews, using question guides provided by the facilitators. The interview questions emphasize collecting specific stories related to the program (often phrased as *Tell me about a time when...*) and an appreciative approach to inquiry, where the focus is on the successes and positive elements of the program (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011). (20-30 minutes).
4. The largest part of the session is the full-group collaborative mind mapping activity, which engages all participants and provides an opportunity to make connections between different program impacts. The facilitator prompts the participants to share the thoughts and experiences that emerged during their reflections and interviews. The discussion can be structured, perhaps working through the interview questions one at a time, or free. The facilitator helps manage the flow of topics and asks follow-up questions when appropriate. As themes emerge from the discussion, the co-facilitators draw out a mind map on a large piece of paper taped to the wall at the front of the room. This portion of the event can also be recorded and supplemented with the facilitators' notes. (50-75 minutes).
5. The session ends with closing statements and a short discussion regarding how the findings of the study may be obtained by participants.

The final outputs of the session include the written individual reflections and pair interview responses, the collaborative mind map produced by the full group, the audio recording of the complete discussion, and the facilitators' notes and observations. These artifacts can then be used as the starting point for further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Results and Key Themes

Collaborative Mind Maps

We conducted two REM sessions with Elar’s stakeholders: one with leaders and staff and second with recent program participants. Figures 1 and 2 show the collaborative mind maps produced during these sessions, transcribed into electronic form using the Miro software package.

The rest of this section focuses on four key themes that emerged in the mind maps, group discussion, and written responses:

1. Developing concrete skills in communication, stress management, and emotional regulation that have beneficial follow-on effects in participants’ lives.
2. Connecting with an inclusive community that promotes an ethos of psychological safety for its members and encourages experimentation and “play” while still respecting individual needs.
3. Promoting greater self-awareness—of both needs and talents—and a movement beyond binary ways of thinking about interpersonal relationships.
4. Cultivating a sense of purpose and a desire to establish a future legacy.

Developing Communication Skills and Emotional Regulation

Participants described ways in which Elar’s programming helped them develop concrete communication skills applicable to their professional and personal lives. Participants mentioned that before coming to Elar they experienced an overall lack of confidence, often accompanied by a fear of public speaking, a disconnect between themselves and others, poor communication skills, and an inability to self-advocate or self-reflect in a meaningful way. One participant mentioned the effects of Elar, citing a renewed motivation for “personal growth” and a desire to develop and strengthen their “emotional intelligence”. Another stated that Elar led them towards “becoming more connected” with themselves, while another participant cited a transformational increase in “self-image”. One participant felt particularly inspired to meet their “needs for contribution, self-growth, and understanding”.

Multiple participants described an improved ability to manage their own emotions and reactions to stressful situations:

- “Being able to respond in a way that’s not driven by your own emotions.”
- “The process overall has made it easier to not attach to feelings and allow them to have greater influence on my interactions.”
- “Able to be self-connected during extreme stress.”
- “More self-advocacy and ability to connect with what I need.”

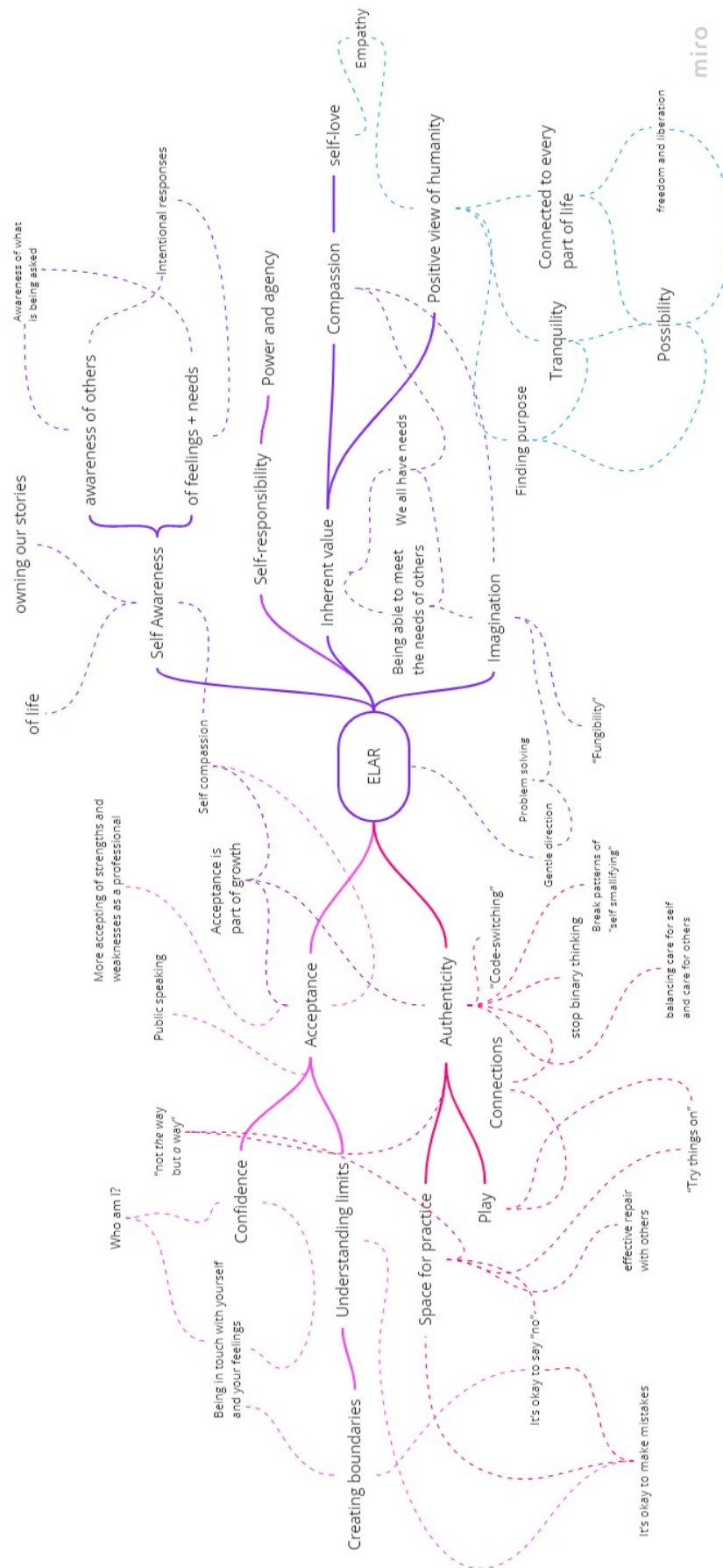


Figure 1: Collaborative ripple effect mind map produced by Elar's leaders and staff.

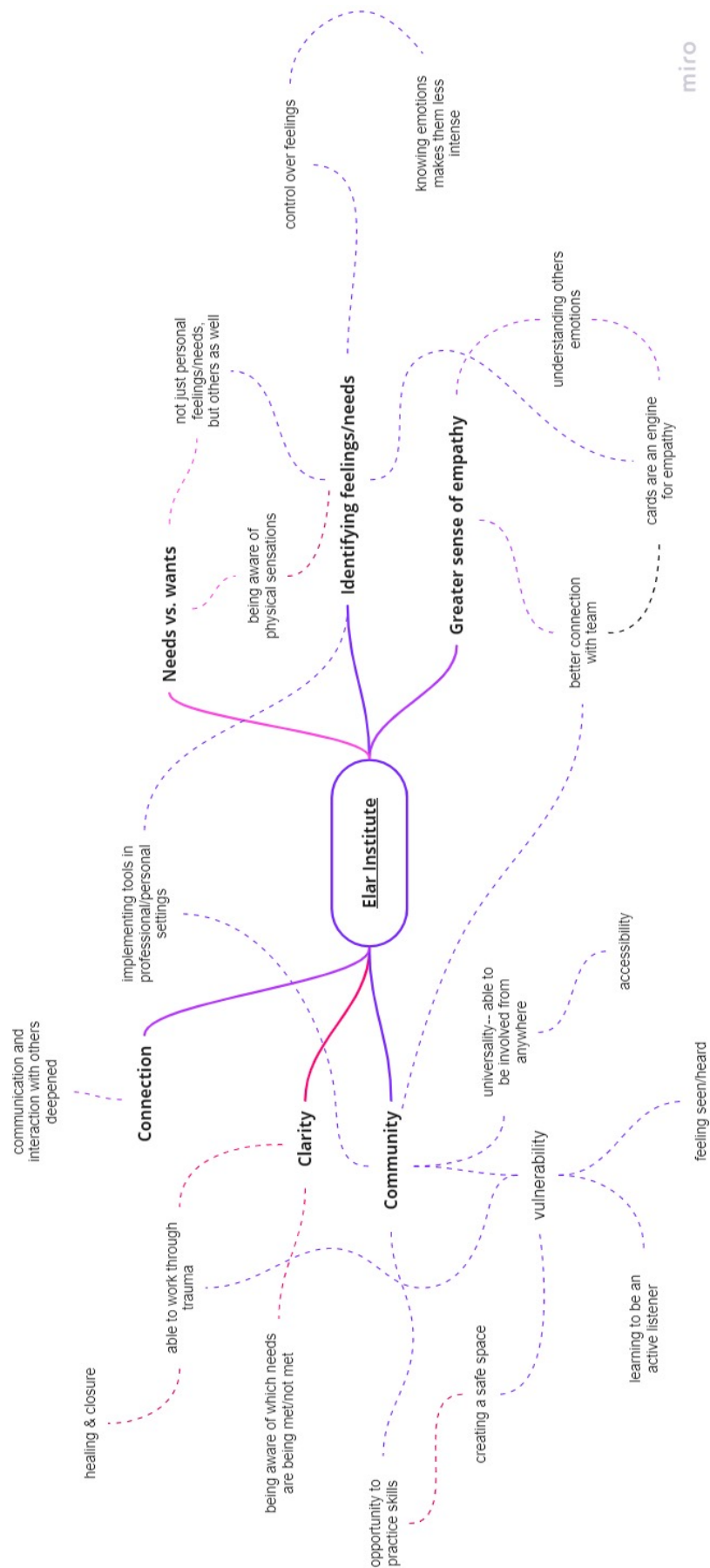


Figure 2: Collaborative ripple effect mind map produced by Elar's program participants.

These improvements were linked to a deeper understanding of the connection between emotional and physical reactions—one participant described how “knowing emotions makes them less intense”, as well as understanding the individual physical manifestations linked to different emotions.

Finally, participants stressed the importance of developing empathy as a key to both improving communication and managing emotional reactions. The theme of understanding others’ needs and responding to those needs with empathy and compassion was an underlying idea that ran throughout conversations with both the Elar leaders and participants.

Connecting with an Inclusive Community

Participants emphasized themes of connection, acceptance, and vulnerability. One participant said, “I am in awe of the space that is created and grateful for this opportunity to connect, learn, and grow.” Another stated, “Elar is truly creating a more beautiful and connected world.” Participants described the value of the community as a place to practice skills, but also a place to be seen, heard, and affirmed. Multiple participants explicitly described the Elar community as a “safe space”.

These ideas are closely linked to the concept of *psychological safety*, where participants can express vulnerability, questions, and doubts without fear of negative consequences from the group (Edmondson, 1999). Because the environment is inclusive, participants feel empowered to admit lack of knowledge without fear of criticism, then mutually construct a path forward in response to the group’s collective needs.

Elar emphasizes the concept of “play” in their activities. Sessions are framed as opportunities to practice new skills, ways of being, or methods of self-presentation in an inclusive setting where, as one leader said, “it’s okay to make mistakes”. In particular, this framing emphasizes the importance of choice: participants are gently challenged to engage in new activities but, according to another leader, “it’s okay to say no”. In their discussion, participants affirmed the practice space as a valuable feature of the Elar program; multiple participants expressed a desire for more advanced practice sessions where they could role-play through difficult communication situations. In their session, leaders and staff emphasized the importance of promoting confidence in participants while also respecting limits and boundaries.

Participants felt they had learned to accept their emotions and work with them, as opposed to working against their feelings prior to the Elar program. This allowed them to feel more vulnerable, yet also more safe in their communities and work spaces, as this newfound acceptance allowed them to view situations from different and more understanding perspectives. One participant mentioned this effect from the program, citing their ability to “communicate on a different

level with other people”, as well as seeing a change in “the meaningfulness of my interactions with different people”.

Promoting Self-Awareness

Participants and leaders described how their work with Elar has helped them develop greater self-awareness, including knowledge of their individual needs and talents. Discussion of this topic clustered around two major themes: first, an improved ability to identify personal feelings and needs; second, how that improved self-knowledge contributes to greater empathy for the feelings and needs of others. One participant described how greater self-awareness, “Leads you to be more compassionate, especially with yourself”. Other statements along these lines include,

- “I have a desire to know myself.”
- “I want to connect with myself better, and become less frustrated when feeling misunderstood.”
- “Becoming more aware of my patterns, gifts, and struggles to learn about myself”.
- “Knowing that I can radically alter the future of others in a constructive manner.”

One participant described the card deck as a, “machine for empathy”.

In discussion with the Elar staff and leaders, self-awareness was connected to compassion. Accepting your own needs leads to an appreciation that others have similar needs, which furthers a pro-social desire to help others meet those needs. Leaders also spoke about the importance of moving beyond binary views, particularly the belief that needs of the self must necessarily be in conflict with the needs of others. Moving beyond binary modes of thinking was connected to “authenticity”—minimizing the gap between the “real” private self and the presented social self—as well as “tranquility”, through cultivating connections with others and an appreciation of shared humanity.

Cultivating Positivity and Purpose

Elar participants expressed a desire to not only transform their own lives, but also the lives of others. Interestingly, finding a sense of purpose was at the forefront of some of Elar participants’ intentions: “But above all, what I’m after is getting to experience the power and satisfaction of making a difference for others.” Another member mentioned, “Being a part of something bigger than yourself” and how necessary it is to “meet my needs for contribution”.

Multiple participants mentioned a desire to use the knowledge they had gained from Elar’s programming to benefit their own families, workplaces, and communities. One participant said, “Every time I think about this training, I want

to spread out the impact to those who are close to me”. Another expressed an interest in pursuing teacher training: “I appreciate that Elar is putting out teacher training courses, going forward it is something that I might be able to take on as a new challenge to maximize the impact this can have in my life.”

Participants also spoke about a desire to create a legacy of positive change:

- “The thing that motivates me the most is knowing that I am a part of something bigger than myself- that I am able to leave a piece of myself for the future in a meaningful way.”
- “Perhaps it’s my way of ensuring I leave a legacy so I’m not forgotten. History, contribution, and culture are important to me.”
- “But above all, what I’m after is getting to experience the power and satisfaction of making a difference for others.”

Connecting Themes

Analysis

The previous section described major themes that emerged during the Ripple Effect Mapping sessions:

- The value of a safe and inclusive group that cultivates vulnerability and promotes psychological safety.
- Improved self-awareness and communication skills amongst participants.
- Participants’ desire for personal growth and finding a purpose.

Elar meets a common need by providing a welcoming environment in which participants can evaluate and explore their feelings and needs, as well as learn about the feelings and needs of other members of their community. This environment provides experiences and knowledge that participants find to be lacking in other programs or aspects of their professional and personal lives.

Elar participants seek to develop their emotional intelligence. Before Elar, many participants felt dissatisfied with their current ways of coping with their feelings, or with their ways of communicating with others. They found it difficult to understand their feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others. As a result of these issues, Elar participants shared a similar desire for personal growth that would allow them to find a deeper understanding of themselves and a more developed purpose in their lives.

In order to help participants achieve this personal growth, Elar provides a safe and inclusive group environment that both cultivates vulnerability and promotes psychological safety. When the Elar participants feel that psychological safety, they are more willing to discuss their feelings and explore what those feelings mean. This is the first step on the road to becoming more emotionally intelligent. Providing this inclusive space is integral to the Elar program.

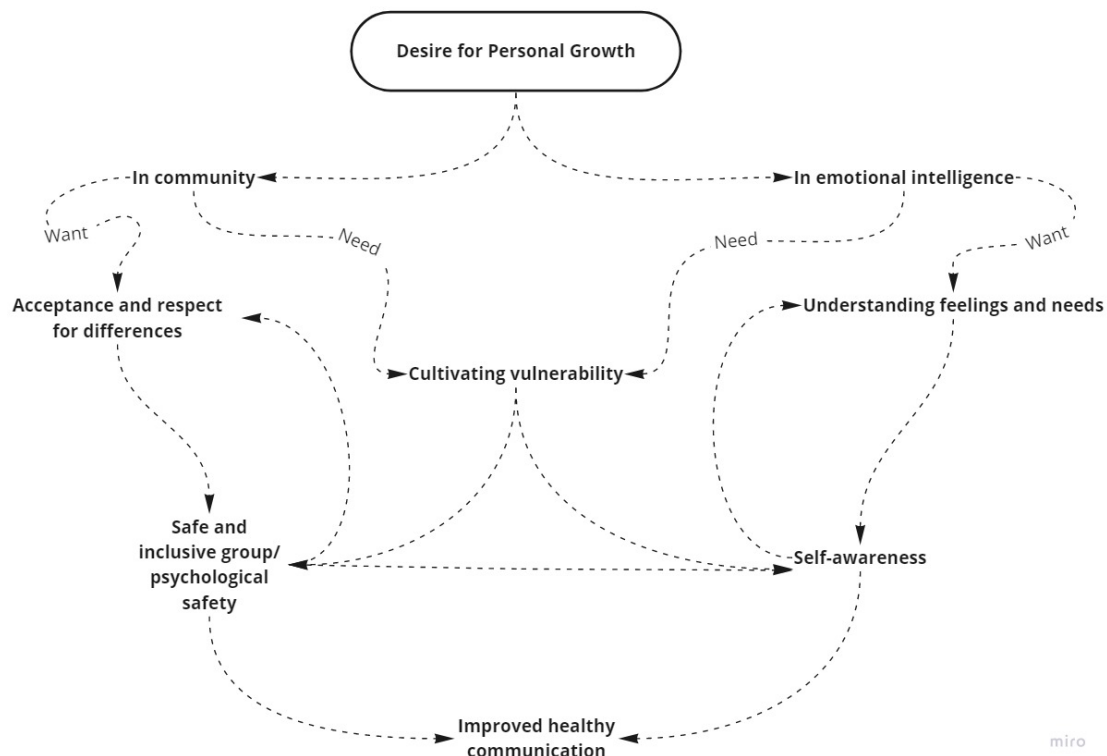


Figure 3: *Relationships between the key themes*

Figure 3 illustrates this process graphically.

Implications

This model provides an explanation for the “engine” of the Elar Institute—the reason why participants in our group perceived it as successful and beneficial. Changes to the program should be carefully evaluated to ensure that they don’t disrupt the beneficial cycles created by the combination of inclusion, self-awareness, and community focus.

Inclusion. Throughout the entirety of our research and interview sessions the topic of inclusion and acceptance in the program came up frequently. Participants felt that Elar provided a group environment in which they were able to be themselves without fear of judgment. This level of inclusion stemmed from the program’s global reach, as they allow for participants to come to the program from anywhere around the world. This diversity in the participant groups cultivates a level of inclusion that cannot come from other local initiatives.

Safe Spaces. The Elar program provides a safe space for those seeking a better understanding of themselves and their emotions. The program depends on vulnerability from its participants, therefore if this space felt in any way unsafe it would destroy the integrity of the program resulting in a loss of success and or

participants.

Personal Growth. The cultivation of a greater understanding of oneself and others is at the forefront of Elar's efforts. Growing to become a better individual who interacts better within their own mind and personal/professional relationships is a means Elar uses to help its community. Elar's impact on the growth and evolution of its participants is a major theme of its success and branding. The Elar community and program has a direct intention to help its participants find practical ways of improving their inner and outer world.

Professional Development. Many participants felt as if Elar directly helped their professional career in helping formulate better relationships with themselves and their colleagues. They are equipped with the tools to respond and navigate certain situations in their professional lives with more ease. Gaining control of their emotions and beginning their journey towards inner excellence trickles down to improve many other areas of their life such as their professional one as well. Hearing testimonies and analyzing interviews, leads us to believe that the inner work in correlation to professional development is a piece of the larger success Elar is having.

The Community Capitals Framework

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) (Flora et al., 2005) defines seven dimensions of community resources that play a role in building healthy and sustainable cities and regions.

1. **Natural capital.** The natural resources and environment of a particular place, which can include traditional exploitable resources, but also encompasses weather, natural features, beauty, and geographic location.
2. **Cultural capital.** The traditions, language, heritage, and other expressions of the peoples that live in a community.
3. **Human capital.** The ability for community members to acquire new resources, develop knowledge, and pursue opportunities. This capital also encompasses the values of inclusive and proactive community leadership.
4. **Social capital.** Connections between individuals and organizations that contribute to development. *Bonding* social capitals are tighter connections that build cohesion within a community. *Bridging* social capitals are looser ties that connect different organizations and subgroups (Emery and Flora, 2006).
5. **Political capital.** Access to centers of power, government officials, and the political process. This capital also encompasses the capacity of community members to advocate for their own interests.

6. **Financial capital.** Assets available to support capacity-building, including investments in business, social entrepreneurship, and future community development.
7. **Built capital.** Physical infrastructure that supports the other capitals, including buildings, transportation, utilities, and digital connectivity.

The CCF is frequently used in extension work, because it acknowledges that communities have many different kinds of assets that can contribute to development (Pigg et al., 2013). Although a single program is unlikely to address all seven capitals, a collection of programs can lead to a “spiraling up”, where progress in one area lays the groundwork for growth in others, forming a beneficial and mutually reinforcing cycle of improvement.

Our analysis shows that the Elar Institute has been effective in increasing the capacity of its participants in the primary areas of cultural, human, and social capitals.

Capital	Contributions
Cultural	Participants have been successful in challenging communication norms and building upon or extending traditions
	Participants actively listen to the groups verbal and expressive language and learn what communication and language best helps participants
	Accepting global community drawing from many different nationalities, heritages, and cultural backgrounds
Human	Participants utilize connection cards to identify feelings and needs which develops their emotional intelligence
	In a group setting, participants learn from each other and add new tools to help them succeed
	ELAR leaders model emotional intelligence and communication skills through collaboration with the group
Social	Participants received social support by connecting in group setting and bonding over shared experiences

Through play and practice, participants learn to accept vulnerability and gain self-awareness

Participants utilize their new skills and apply tools to other social groups

Conclusion

Drawing upon the collective experience of the Elar Institute' participants and leaders, this study has shown that Elar's programming is effective at developing emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and communication skills. Our results further demonstrate a connection between improvements in these areas and personal and professional growth. Our results demonstrate the connection between an inclusive environment and successful peer-to-peer learning, as well as the value of collaborative leadership that responds to participants' needs. Taken as a whole, this study makes a convincing case for the value of the Elar Institute's programming and its place within both the local and global nonprofit ecosystem. Future research in this area can focus on the longer-term impact of Elar, its community networks, and further Ripple Effect Mapping studies with similar programs.

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