

SOCIAL ISOLATION



EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS

relazioni



HIKKOMORI

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relAzioni

The project “relAzioni” is a **solidarity project** funded by the “European Solidarity Corps” programme, an activity that a group of at least 5 people (aged 18-30) can carry out with the aim of making a **positive contribution to the local community**. It is organized and implemented directly by young people in the place where they live.

The project “relAzioni” stems from the desire of some young people from Bologna to **raise awareness** on a topic that, especially in recent years, is becoming significant in the lives of many people, but on which there is not real awareness: the topic **of the so-called social recluses**.

The main objective of the project is to increase awareness within our community about hikikomori, and thus help prevent the increase.

Voluntary social isolation is a disorder that tends to become chronic, to the point where you can remain isolated for many years. The phenomenon tends to arise mainly in the adolescent phase, which is why the project is aimed mainly at young people in this age group.



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In order to achieve the general objective, the project has the following specific objectives:

- **Increase the level of knowledge** and information in the citizens of Bologna on the subject of social recluses or Hikikomori.
- **Inform** adolescents **about the mechanisms** that **can push a boy or girl to voluntarily isolate themselves**.
- **Raise awareness among the families** of the people involved and the teachers with whom they interact on a daily basis.
- **Connect Hikikomori and/or their families** with realities dealing with social and work reintegration of categories at risk of marginalization.



relAzioni

The project “relAzioni” has been carried out by young people of the territory with the support of **YouNet APS** (www.you-net.eu), third sector organization active in the field of international mobility, youth policies, euro-design and social inclusion.

The other partners involved in this project are:

- **Gian Franco Minguzzi**

(<https://minguzzi.cittametropolitana.bo.it/>) is an institution of the metropolitan city of Bologna that has been dealing with psychiatry for forty years, as well as mental health issues, a much broader concept that affects everyone. It does not only treats teenage uneasiness, but it also works for the promotion of well-being. In 2019, it organized in Bologna a cycle of three seminars to deepen and provide tools to learn about the phenomenon of social isolation and intervention through the presentation of work experiences at national level. The first meeting was designed for teachers; the second for socio-health and socio educational services; the third for parents.

- **Ama Hikikomori APS**

(<http://www.amahikikomori.it/>) is an association founded in Bologna by a group of parents of young hikikomori who were initially part of the national association Hikikomori Italia Genitori.

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The implementation phase of the project involved about **one hundred students** from three classes of the “**Liceo Sabin**” and four classes of the “**Istituto I.I.S. Giordano Bruno**”: two high schools in the metropolitan city of Bologna.

In the first phase, students as well as lecturers, headmasters, the Parents Committee and psychologists of “Sportello d’Ascolto”, participated in a series of awareness-raising meetings carried out remotely.

With the precious collaboration of **Laura Calosso**, writer and investigative journalist, **Bruna Zani**, President of the “Istituzione Gian Franco Minguzzi”, **Angela Berti**, vice-president of the “AMA Hikikomori APS” association, the phenomenon of social isolation has been faced, the characteristics of this social distress have been detailed and advice and practical suggestions have been offered to recognize and help those who are experiencing this problem.

Reflections and testimonies and clear references to real situations have also helped to realize this reality and raise awareness among participants, especially young adolescents.

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Hikikomori: choice or impulse?

The misunderstanding about the hikikomori is that they want to withdraw from the outside world. In fact, social recluses are driven by an impulse that they cannot control. They are not aware of what is happening, they do not make a life choice. It may happen that one day, after a long process, the hikikomori realize that they are no longer able to cross the threshold of the school, as if there was a wall in front of them.

This barrier is nothing more than a deep suffering of these boys and girls to be with others. Isolation thus becomes an attempt to look for the situation to suffer the least. There is no reasoning behind it, the hikikomori feel suffocated if they are in the classroom, with friends or with other people and have to escape from this context. As a result, when they isolate themselves, we should not think that there is a voluntary act behind this action.

The Hikikomori realize that there are people who want to help them, but they know that they are not in a position to accept that anchor of salvation because there is an impulse that dominates them.

Social recluses are often very sensitive young people who have a problem of dealing with pressure generated by society, family, school, friends around them. They do not lose their ability to speak, read, study, but are unable to give instructions to others on how to behave with them to avoid isolation, as they are completely unaware of what is happening.

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The first signs

There are some red flags to recognize if you are dealing with a boy or girl hikikomori to whom parents, teachers, peer group must pay close attention.

Among the first signs, related to the behavior of social recluses, we find: abandonment of sports activities, frequent delays in arriving at school, inability to support the gaze of others, inability to manage one's body and gestures in the presence of other people, manifestations of strange illnesses such as stomach pain, headaches, often interpreted as excuses because possibly without an organic origin, but in reality real manifestations of an inner discomfort. Being able to grasp these first signs quickly enough certainly increases the likelihood of being able to help social recluses.

External and traumatic events

Due to their particularly strong sensitivity, social recluses are often destabilized by a series of external and traumatic events that occur in their lives and make the situation worse.

There are many factors that can intervene: marital separations, family mourning, transfers, and bullying events by schoolmates or professors. Fear of the judgments of others, the feeling of not being understood, the fear of not being up to others and to goals, the inability to handle school pressure and the high expectations of the family can make the situation worse. At a delicate moment like that of adolescence, hikikomori are driven by these shocking factors into a spiral from which it becomes difficult to get out on their own, thus ending up in isolation from the world.

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SOCIAL PRESSURE

Society is like a barrel, chasing these young people straight down a mountain



social pressure



feeling inadequate



fear



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Stages of social isolation

Hikikomori boys and girls lose contact with the world gradually. In a first phase social recluses, although closed in their rooms, remain connected with others through social networks.

That means they still have a chance to be approached by someone. However, when they realize that they are gradually forgotten or ignored by the peer group, they can reach the final stage of hikikomori, where social outcasts completely lose confidence in others, and wish to remain isolated from everything and everyone. For this reason, it is essential to intervene correctly, without making mistakes, from the initial phase of isolation, in order to maintain the fragment of trust that the hikikomori initially have in those who are outside.

How to approach a hikikomori?

If you are a partner or a schoolmate, you should identify the teacher who is more open-minded or trustworthy, as it is very delicate to intervene directly on the individual and his family.

It is therefore important to speak promptly with a selected teacher and explain to them that you have the impression that someone in the classroom is manifesting symptoms that can be connected to the social isolation. Often in schools there is a counselling service composed of psychologists, i.e. professionals who know the phenomenon and can therefore take on the problem.

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How to approach a Hikikomori? (cont.)

If it is a friend or an individual with whom you have more confidence, it is important to keep the relationship open. Communication should be maintained, although there is a risk that social recluses may not respond.

This situation can be frustrating, as you find yourself in front of an individual who withdraws even more out of fear and lack of confidence in others, because they are driven by the belief that no one cares about them anymore. It is therefore necessary to approach the hikikomori lightly, as if it were a completely normal situation, telling them about your day and not asking them questions as if you wanted to question them. You should make the Hikikomori feel your closeness without necessarily expecting a response back.

There are cases of hikikomori boys and girls who left the house and returned to a normal situation after finding out in the chat that someone else had the same interests.

Their problem tends to dissolve when they find a reason to be in the world. It is therefore important to stimulate the desire to live in hikikomori. It is not a quick path, but every effort must be made to facilitate this motivation to the meaning of life.

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Another **awareness-raising event** open to the community was held at the “**Officina polivalente delle arti e dei mestieri di Bologna – Camere d’Aria**”, under the patronage of the San Vitale/San Donato district, in the presence of sociologist **Marialuisa Mazzetti**, author of the book 'Hikikomori. The blocked journey of the hero', which described the phenomenon of social isolation highlighting similarities and differences in the approach to this problem between Italian and Japanese culture.

Hikikomori: male vs female

A fundamental aspect concerns the difference between male and female hikikomori in the two countries. In Japan, the male hikikomori accounts for 90 % of cases. As a result, the whole Hikikomori theory that has come to Italy has been calibrated on males. This is a problem because in Italy the hikikomori males are 70 %, compared to 30 % of females. This means that the presence of young women withdrawn from society is very important in Italy but is underestimated.

In addition, the data of reports of social isolation are less among girls only because culturally in Italy a girl locked in the house causes less concern than a male child. It is no coincidence that usually hikikomori are only children, because they feel all the pressure on them. At the same time, some characteristics identified in male social isolations do not always apply to women, such as hatred for society: boys manifest much more hatred for society and for the female world, identifying the choice of isolation as a consequence of the behavior of others. Girls, on the other hand, do not experience such a marked hatred for society, to which they remain more engaged, tending to read more, inquire about the environment and politics.

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Hikikomori: architecture of the house

Another important aspect concerns the question of the architecture of the house, which has changed a lot the relationship between parents and children or other relatives both in Italy and Japan. Nowadays, the hikikomori all have a single and personal bedroom, often separated from the rest of the house and, in some cases, they even have a single bathroom. This sort of isolation is therefore something that you create around in a much subtler way than you are accustomed to thinking from a psychological point of view.

Increase the spaces in which to experience yourself

Isolation begins before you notice it, with a sense of solitude and emptiness that goes beyond the physical isolation of the individual.

Hikikomori suffer from the absence of protective factors. It would be more useful if there was more collaboration on the territory and if there was a chance to make hikikomori boys and girls experience safe spaces. Uncompetitive activities should be carried out, territorial links with families should be improved, common means should be used, and meetings should be organized.

relAzioni

Students of the “Liceo Sabin” and the “Istituto I.I.S. Giordano Bruno” participated actively in a series of **workshops** conducted in a mixed mode: online and in presence.

They have produced, divided into small groups, a press review, researching on the web articles and other generic content on the theme of social isolation. They have therefore deepened the content of the materials found and finally created a series of Power Point presentations set with a hierarchy of information, from those that report a correct definition of the phenomenon, to those that are fake news or partially reliable.

This activity laid the basis for a work of **deconstruction of the news** that was **conducted in the presence of psychologist and psychotherapist Katia Bianchi** who, together with the colleagues mentioned above, has dispelled the doubts of young adolescents about the phenomenon of social isolation.

These doubts, as evidenced by the laboratory activity, are often fueled by disinformation circulating on the web.

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Hikikomori: are we in front of a psychopathology?

It is a mistake to diagnose the disorder of voluntary social withdrawal as a psychopathology or a syndrome, as it is a behavior that we see in people very different from each other, as well as young people from different cultures, countries, social environments, whose common trait is isolation. In this perspective it becomes essential to see what their personal experience is, the experience that led them to isolate themselves. To do this, you should try to understand and not to judge.

Hikikomori and Internet: cause or cure?

Although the media often misrepresent hikikomori as internet-dependent boys and girls, internet addiction and social retreat are two completely different realities, which cannot relate to or identify each other.

The social isolation stems from an impulse to be separated from the rest of society, from friends. It is not by chance that the term hikikomori means to stand aside. Social recluses use the Internet for a minimum purpose of connection with society. Technology is therefore not the cause of social isolation, but it is the thread that keeps them connected with the outside world, as well as a tool that can help them regain confidence in others.

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Noi pensiamo che questo fenomeno sia un argomento di cui si dovrebbe parlare di più nelle scuole e ai genitori, dato che la maggior parte degli adulti associa questa cosa all'uso eccessivo dei dispositivi elettronici. Mentre, in realtà si tratta di chiudere ogni contatto con tutti e tutto e i dispositivi elettronici sono l'ultimo contatto col mondo.



Communicating and listening

It is important to believe in the power of one's ability to communicate and listen. Communication is essential to maintain relations. One of the elements that characterizes social recluses is the idea that in the outside world there is nothing that is really worth going out for.

In this perspective, the presence of friends, of the peer group, who can help social outcasts to understand that the world is a better place than they imagine, is even more important. How? It is enough to be present, listen to the silence of others, recognizing its sounds and multiple facets, and to share the joy of seeing them again.

relAzioni

After the end of the cycle of laboratories involving the selected classes of the “Liceo Sabin” and the “Istituto I.I.S. Giordano Bruno”, an **evaluation questionnaire** was sent to students to detect their degree of satisfaction with the solidarity project “relAzioni”.

Most young people said they were very satisfied with the meetings they attended and that they were very emotionally involved. There are many reasons, such as:

- in-depth understanding of the phenomenon
- identify with the discomfort experienced by those who lock themselves up in the room, regardless of the cause
- empathize with social recluses due to the recent pandemic period

What this experience has left to teenagers is the awareness of being living a complex period of their lives, where perseverance in trying to help others can make a difference. Young people have also developed the awareness of having experienced a training experience, from which they have gained new answers and knowledge: there is no age to start being selfless and responsible to others.

relAzioni

The final phase of the project “relAzioni” was represented by the realization of a final event in presence organized by the association YouNet APS at the **Social Centre A. Montanari in Bologna.**

The meeting involved students of the “Liceo Sabin”, and it was an opportunity to put into practice the knowledge and experiences acquired and to make young people protagonists, giving space to the presentation of the final products that they created as a result of the workshops, such as a podcast and an informative brochure on the phenomenon of social isolation.



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Finally, large space was devoted to the **group discussion**, the exchange of ideas for reflection and the return to plenary of the experience. Compared to the considerations that had emerged in previous awareness-raising meetings and workshops, four working tables were created: a sheet containing a phrase or keyword related to the theme of social isolation on which to build an informal conversation was provided for each group of participants.

HIKIKOMORI E PRESSIONE SOCIALE	CHE COSA FARESTI SE UN TUO AMICO FOSSE UN HIKIKOMORI?
QUALI ALTRE INIZIATIVE DI CONFRONTO SU HIKIKOMORI SUGGERISCI?	HIKIKOMORIE INTERNET: CAUSA O CURA?

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CHE COSA FARESTI SE UN TUO AMICO FOSSE UN HIKIKOMORI?

- ~~●~~ ~~MOSTRARE~~ LA TUA PRESENZA NOTTALMENTE (SCUOLA E FUORI)
- TU INFORMERET SUL FENOMENO.
- NE PARLERET CON LE PERSONE A LUI VICINO (SCUOLA, FAMIGLIA, AMICI)
- NON ASSUARLO, NON FARE PRESSIONE
- FARGLI CAPIRE CHE NON E' DA SOLO
- ASCOLTARE IL SUO SILENZIO E ~~MASSAGE~~ ^{CAPIRE} I SUOI COMPORATTI
- CAPIRE CHE VITA VIVEVA PRIMA E VEDERE SE HA PERSO INTERESSI
- NON FARLO SENTIRE SBAGLIATO.
- ① AVERE TANTA PAZIENZA, NON ARRENDERSI DAVANTI AI NO.
- NON LASCIARLO SOLO, DITTO STRAGLI IL TUO BENE, CAPIRLO E STARGLI VICINO.

- ASCOLTARE / LEGGERE STORIE E ESPERIENZE DIRETTE DI HIKIKOMORI (TESTIMONIANZE)
- CERCARE INFORMAZIONI SU INTERNET
- RAPPRESENTAZIONI TEATRALI
- VOLANTINI
- VIDEO DA PUBBLICARE SUI SOCIAL
- DOMANDE E RISPOSTE
- PARLARE CON PERSONE/ASSOCIAZIONI INFORMATE
- SPAZIO GIOVANI, CONSULENZA, BIBLIOTECHE
- NORMALTÀ
- RACCONTARLO A QUALCUNO
- GUARDARE FILM/ANIME ecc...
- DOCUMENTARSI / GUARDARE LA TV, SITI ...
- SENTIRE CANZONI

QUALI INIZIATIVE
DI CONFRONTO SU
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During this activity, **Angela Berti**, vice-president of the “AMA Hikikomori APS” association and the sociologist **Marialuisa Mazzetti**, took part and stimulated more the reflection within groups on multiple facets of the phenomenon of social isolation. The work ended with the return to plenary of the main points by young people.

