

Beyond the Cards MANUAL





Beyond the Cards

The Facilitator's Guide to ConnectiON Vibes

A journey of connection, courage, and breakthrough moments.

Welcome to the Facilitator's Guide.

This isn't just about learning a game. It's about creating space where people feel safe enough to share what's real. The cards give structure. The rules create rhythm. But the real magic comes from how you hold the group.

This guide will help you:

- Set the tone for honest sharing
- Build safety and trust from the first minute
- Navigate awkward or emotional moments
- Close sessions with clarity and care

"Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering."

- Brene Brown - "Daring Greatly" - 09.2012 -

So, thank you for being here.

For daring to hold space for true connection.

For helping youth turn small talk into meaningful relationships.

Created as part of the ConnectiON Vibes project, co-funded by the European Union

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connectionvibes.eu

The Creators

ConnectiON Vibes was co-created by three organizations from Romania, Cyprus, and Italy, united by the same belief: that youth deserve spaces where real connection can grow.



Schimbare cu Sens (SCS) - Romania

Lead partner and game designer. SCS ("Meaningful Change") develops tools, trainings, and games to help people shape their own lives and communities. In this project, they brought the spark of ConnectiON Vibes — blending play, psychology, and facilitation.



The Serendipitous Black Cloud (SBC) - Cyprus

Content and facilitation expertise. SBC specializes in systemic psychotherapy, trauma management, and community resilience. They ensured the manual supports facilitators in holding safe and transformative group experiences.



YOUMORE APS – Italy

Youth engagement and dissemination. YOUMORE is a youth-led NGO in Brescia that creates opportunities for skill-building and intercultural exchange. They tested the game with youth and helped bring the project into real communities.



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Part 1: The ConnectiON Vibes Experience

Why This Exists

This project was born out of frustration with shallow conversations and the quiet loneliness of surface-level interactions. We believe something better is not only possible but deeply needed — not just for youth, but for anyone who craves authenticity and belonging.

ConnectiON Vibes exists to make that "better" easier to reach. It's more than a game. It's a framework for emotional courage. A method for slowing down. A tool for listening like it actually matters. It makes vulnerability feel safer, and connection feel like something you can build on purpose — not just hope for.

When used with care, ConnectiON Vibes helps groups go from strangers to teammates in under an hour. From "meh" to "I didn't expect to share that." From social performance to genuine presence. But none of this happens automatically. The game creates the opportunity. The space makes it real. And that space is your responsibility.

Why connection? Why now?

We live in a time where connection has become paradoxically rare. Youth across Europe, especially those who are migrants, neurodivergent, from rural or underserved backgrounds, face massive barriers to building meaningful relationships. Cultural silos, digital isolation, and social anxiety make it harder to feel seen. This game is a counter-offer to that trend. A structured invitation back to what we all need: real, human connection.

Who This Is (and Isn't) For

This manual is for youth workers, facilitators, educators, mentors — anyone holding space for young people aged 16–22. It is especially relevant for those working across difference: race, culture, language, ability, class, or lived experience.

If you're new to this kind of spaceholding, welcome. This guide will give you the mindset and tools to begin.

If you're experienced, this may give you sharper instincts, new language, and a refreshed approach.

This is **not**:

- A therapy guide
- A replacement for mental health support
- A rules manual for the game (that's a separate document)

This **is**:

- A toolbox for presence, safety, and emotional leadership
- A support structure for when things get weird, messy, or unexpectedly deep
- A way to unlock the deeper potential of the ConnectiON Vibes experience

The Role of the Facilitator

You're not a performer. You're not the expert. You're not there to entertain, fix, or diagnose. You are the signal that it's safe to be real here.

You are the one who:

- Sets the tone, especially in the first few minutes
- Models presence with your body, voice, and attention
- Holds the edge when things get vulnerable, without flinching
- Steps in when safety or inclusion breaks
- Knows when to pause, when to pivot, and when to let silence speak

Facilitating this game is an act of service. It's emotional leadership in its rawest form. And it's one of the most impactful things you can offer to a group of young people today.

From Game to Transformation

If all you do is play the cards, you'll still get something.

But if you bring this manual to life — by preparing the space, owning your presence, and responding to the group with care and clarity — then this won't just be a game.

It will be a turning point.

A reset.

A moment they remember.

That's the power of connection when it's held with intention.

Part 2: Before You Facilitate

The Mindset Shift

The most important thing you bring into the room isn't your script or your experience. It's how you show up. The energy in your nervous system will echo through the entire space. The group might not know the rules yet, but they will feel your state. So your presence is your first intervention.

Facilitation isn't about being impressive. It's about being steady. When emotions rise or things get awkward, your non-reactivity tells everyone: we can stay with this.

You don't need to push for depth. You just need to create safety. Then, depth often comes on its own.

Think of your role like this:

- X You create the conditions
- Y The group creates the connection

Let go of performance. Show up with presence.

What to Drop Before You Lead

Habit to Drop	Why It Backfires	What to Do Instead
"I need to keep it light"	Depth needs space. Too much positivity can flatten nuance.	Let silence breathe. Let emotions land.
"I should always know what to say"	Overfunctioning kills presence.	Try: "Thanks for sharing that." Pause.
"I have to protect them from discomfort"	Overprotection can become silencing.	Let people choose what they share. Support their agency.
"If it gets awkward, I've failed"	Awkwardness is often a doorway.	Name it. Normalize it. Keep going.
"I'm responsible for everyone's comfort"	Comfort and safety aren't the same.	Hold safety. Let discomfort be okay.

You're not here to steer emotions. You're here to make sure the space can hold them.

How to Regulate Yourself

Before you facilitate others, you need to be aware of your own internal state. Youth pick up on inauthenticity fast. Instead of "faking calm," learn to access it.

Ask yourself:

- Can I stay grounded if someone shares something painful?
- Can I stay curious if something surprises me?
- Can I admit I don't know what will happen next?

• Can I trust the group to co-create with me?

If most of those are a "yes," you're ready enough.

Session Prep Checklist

Beyond your internal state, there's the external prep. Use this checklist to make sure the space is ready to support connection.

☑ Do I know who's coming and how many? ☑ Is the space quiet, private, and distraction-free?

✓ Are cards sorted by level and ready to go? ✓ Do I have something to track time if needed?

 \square Do I have a grounding activity ready in case things go deep? \square Do I know what to do if someone gets overwhelmed or triggered?

Opening the Session: Words & Tone

The first minutes set the tone. If you lead with hype, people stay in their heads. If you lead with warmth, people start to drop in.

You might say:

"This isn't about performing or impressing anyone. You don't have to share anything you don't want to. We're just here to listen. To connect. One story at a time. You choose how deep you go. There are no right answers."

Then, co-create safety:

- Ask for agreement on basic group values (see Part 5 or Appendix).
- A simple thumbs-up from everyone is enough to begin.

Final Reminder

You don't need to feel 100% confident. Just stay available to what's happening. Presence matters more than polish. And you can always pause, breathe, and begin again.

Part 3: Running the Game, Holding the Group

This isn't just a game. It's a structured emotional journey disguised as a playful card activity. The cards, points, and doors are the surface. Beneath that? Trust. Courage. Micro-breakthroughs. Your job is to help the group move through the experience with clarity, care, and curiosity.

This section helps you understand how the game works not just mechanically, but *emotionally*. Because every move on the table affects the group's dynamic.

How the Game Works (Emotionally and Mechanically)

Yes, the ConnectiON Vibes game has levels, doors, points, and energy meters. But under the surface, what's really happening is:

- Creating psychological safety through clear progression
- Offering controlled risks (deeper sharing = higher reward)
- Giving players choice and agency (opt-in, not forced)
- Using play to regulate nervous systems and build trust

The door structure supports gradual risk-taking. The energy meter adds urgency and teamwork. Appreciation cards shift the focus from performance to presence. This emotional logic is baked into every part of the gameplay.

The Emotional Arc of a Session

Most sessions will follow a familiar pattern. If you know what to expect, you'll be able to pace and support the group much more effectively.

1. Curiosity — People joke, test the waters, try to stay surface. Let it be light. Don't rush it.

- 2. **Hesitation** The first moment of vulnerability drops. Silence follows. The room might tense up. Let the quiet land. Affirm that it's welcome.
- 3. **Momentum** Trust begins to build. Laughter and tears often mix. This is your flow state. Stay alert. Watch for signs of emotional fatigue.
- 4. **Saturation** Someone hits a limit. The vibe dips. That's your signal. Use a light card, offer a break, or do something grounding.
- 5. **Reflection** The group softens. The tone shifts. This is when meaning integrates. Support it with a slow, clear close.

How to Use Story Levels

There are 3 primary story levels. Each level corresponds not just to depth of content, but to intensity of emotion.



Level 1 – Light, Playful, Curious

Great for warm-ups, resets, or lower-energy groups



Level 2 – Personal, Reflective, Honest

Begins touching identity, values, and emotional memory



Level 3 – Vulnerable, Bold, Raw

Only use when there's visible trust in the room

Facilitator Tip: Once deeper levels are unlocked, let the group mix freely. Sometimes the right silly question is exactly what keeps the group from tipping into emotional exhaustion.

Emotional Logic Behind the Game Elements

These mechanics aren't random. They're emotional design tools:



Doors = Emotional Thresholds

Crossing a door represents taking a shared emotional risk.

The group needs to spend energy to break through — just like in real life.



Energy Meter = Group Momentum

Energy goes down when no one breaks a door in a full round. It's a signal: Are we avoiding challenge? Are we just storytelling passively? It reminds the group that real connection takes shared effort.



Appreciation Cards = Micro-Validation

- Everyone starts with 2, at the beginning.
- Can get more during the game.
- They affirm presence, not performance.
- They create tiny rituals of recognition, which sustain trust.
- If someone gets awarded 3 cards for one story told, the group gains energy a design nudge to support each other.
- A player can hold a maximum of 5 un-used appreciations. If they get the 6th they need to discard half. This includes the 2 cards you have from the start of the game.



Champion Marker Card

- Keep track of who broke the last door.
- If the turn reaches a person that has the Champion Marker Card, the group loses an energy point.
- At the start the first player gets the card. They need to break the door at their next turn or lose an energy point.

Champion Marker helps track who started — it matters for when rounds end and energy loss happens.

The Three Core Skills of a Great Facilitator

1. Solution Listening

- Not nodding. Not waiting your turn. Real, embodied listening.
- Let silences breathe. Resist jumping in too quickly.
- Try: "Take your time." or "Would you like to pause or keep going?"

2. **W** Empathy

- o You don't have to feel what they feel. Just sit beside them in it.
- Avoid solving or analyzing.
- Try: "That sounds tough." or "I really appreciate you naming that."

3. AN Non-Judgment

- No correcting, interpreting, or validating only certain kinds of vulnerability.
- Your neutrality is safety.
- o Try: "Thanks for sharing that." or "That makes sense."

Facilitator Phrases That Work

Use these like tools — when the moment calls, pull one out:

- When someone hesitates: "No pressure to go deep. Your pace matters."
- After a hard story: "Let's take a breath before we move on."
- When someone laughs after crying: "That's normal. Laughter often rides shotgun with emotion."
- When someone is visibly moved: "Thank you for sharing that. We're right here with you."
- When energy dips: "Let's grab a Level 1 card or do a quick reset."

Supporting Mixed & Marginalized Groups

Not every group feels safe the same way. Cultural, neurodivergent, or language differences mean you need to pay closer attention to:

- ✓ Speak clearly. Avoid idioms or abstract metaphors.
- ✔ Normalize passing. Give non-verbal participation options.
- ✓ Ask: "Is there anything I should know to make this easier for you?"
- ✓ Don't assume shared norms: eye contact, interrupting, humor, or assertiveness.
- ✓ Actively balance the space support quiet voices, gently limit dominant ones.

Inclusion isn't about everyone feeling the same.

It's about everyone feeling safe enough to be themselves.

Part 4: When Things Get Messy

Let's be honest: no matter how well you prepare, group dynamics will surprise you. Real connection invites emotion, and emotion is messy. Someone will get overwhelmed. Someone

will shut down. Someone will make an awkward or insensitive comment. You might even freeze yourself.

That doesn't mean the session failed. It means it got real.

Your job is not to avoid all mess — it's to respond to it with steadiness and care. This section gives you practical guidance for some of the most common difficult moments you'll encounter.

1. Emotional Overload / Someone Cries

This might happen more often than you think. When someone opens up, they may cry unexpectedly. Don't panic. You don't need to explain it, fix it, or make it go away.

What to do:

- Stay grounded. Your nervous system helps regulate theirs.
- Let silence do the work. Don't rush it.
- Offer a tissue or a glass of water if it feels right.
- Say something simple, like: "It's totally okay to feel that. Take your time."

What NOT to do:

- Don't minimize with jokes or "You're okay."
- Don't turn it into a group processing moment unless they invite that.
- Don't try to translate the emotion just witness it.

Reset option: use a grounding prompt (light story card, breath exercise, or short pause).

2. Shut Down / Disengagement

Some participants will pull back — by choice or by overwhelm. That doesn't mean they're not getting value. But it *does* mean you need to slow the pace and adapt.

What to do:

- Normalize it: "Some people need more time. That's totally fine."
- Give alternative forms of engagement: writing, drawing, pair-sharing
- Lower the stakes: return to a Level 1 card or do a group challenge

What NOT to do:

- Don't pressure them to speak.
- Don't point out their silence.
- Don't assume they're checked out. Many are just processing quietly.

3. Disrespectful Comment or Laughter at the Wrong Moment

It might be nervous energy. It might be unconscious bias. Either way, if someone makes a dismissive or harmful comment, it breaks safety.

What to do:

- 1. Pause the group: "Let's hold for a second."
- 2. Name it with care: "That didn't feel aligned with the space we're creating."
- 3. Re-center the group: remind them of the shared values
- 4. Check in privately later with anyone affected

What NOT to do:

- Don't ignore it
- Don't scold in public (unless necessary for safety)
- Don't assume intent equals impact

This is about protecting the space, not punishing the person.

4. You Freeze as the Facilitator

Everyone does at some point. You get caught off guard. You lose your train of thought. You feel pressure to say the "right thing."

What to do:

- Pause. Breathe. Ground yourself.
- Own it. Say: "I'm going to take a moment to reset."
- Look at the last card played. Ask the group: "Would anyone like to reflect on that?"

What NOT to do:

- Don't fake confidence. They'll feel it.
- Don't over-explain. Just reorient and move on.

Remember: presence matters more than polish.

5. Someone Gets Triggered or Dissociates

This is different from emotional sharing. You'll notice a shift: the person may go blank, avoid eye contact, become unresponsive, or seem frozen. This may signal a trauma response.

What to do:

- Quietly check in: "Would you like to step outside with me or take a break?"
- Give them space. Let them lead at their own pace.
- Don't ask for details. Don't try to bring them back through words alone.
- If something serious is shared (e.g. abuse, suicidal thoughts), follow your local safeguarding protocol immediately.

You are not their therapist. But you are responsible for noticing and responding with care.

Reset Tools for When the Vibe Breaks

Use these when the group feels off-balance:

Situation	What to Try
Heavy energy	Play a Level 1 card. Do a 30-second shake or breath reset.
Group is distracted	Switch to pairs or small trios.
Dominating voices	Do a silent writing round before sharing aloud.

Awkward silence	Say: "Let's sit with that for a breath."
Laughter during pain	Say: "Let's pause — that story deserves our full presence."

Final Reminder

The group will only go as deep as they feel safe.

Your job isn't to avoid discomfort — it's to make sure the space can hold it.

When things go off-script, that's not failure. That's your moment to lead.

Pause. Breathe. Reground.

Then... continue.

That's what real facilitation looks like.

Part 5: Make It Happen

You don't need a perfect plan.

You need a simple, trusted rhythm — something steady you can lean on when the room is filling, the energy is unknown, and someone already looks nervous.

This section gives you practical formats, simple rituals, and repeatable structures so you can show up calm, clear, and ready to hold space — no matter what the group throws at you.

45-Minute Express Session

Great for:

- One-off events
- Mixed-age or mixed-trust groups
- Youth with limited attention or energy

Goal: Light connection, laughter, and presence. Go just deep enough to matter.

Suggested Flow:

Time	What to Do
0–5 min	Welcome + Group Agreements (short version)
5–15 min	Explain the game. Quick demo round.
15–35 min	Play (Level 1 cards only + optional Door 1)
35–45 min	Closing: Ask "What's one thing you're taking with you?" or use a light Final Door

Optional add-on: Do an appreciation round at the end. Let everyone give 1 appreciation card to someone else.

90-Minute Deep Connection Session

Great for:

• Retreats and residential programs

- Groups with trust or shared purpose
- When you want to go deeper and give it space

Goal: Deep trust, meaningful stories, emotional resonance

Suggested Flow:

Time	What to Do
0–10 min	Welcome + Co-create Safety Agreements
10–20 min	Explain the game mechanics. Show a sample door.
20–70 min	Game time (open Levels 2 & 3, doors, mixed pacing)
70–85 min	Final challenge or shared ritual (e.g. Final Door)
85–90 min	Grounding close: breath, gratitude circle, silence

Facilitator tip: Let the group vote on their final challenge. This builds ownership and energy.

Debrief Formats (Pick What Fits the Room)

Ompass Check-In

Each person shares one direction:

- North: What felt strong or powerful?
- East: What gave you energy?
- **South:** What felt vulnerable or surprising?
- West: What do you want to carry with you?

One Wave Reflection

Ask: "What surprised you — about yourself, someone else, or the vibe in the room?" Let it stay snappy or open into a deeper share.

Rapid Sentence Round

Go in a circle. One sentence each:

- "What are you leaving with?" or
- "What's something you didn't expect but needed?"

Pre-Session Prep Checklist

You don't need to be over-prepared. You need to be grounded.

Run through this checklist before any session:

- Do I know the group size and general vibe?
- Do I have cards ready (by level)?

- Are the doors stacked and the energy meter in place?
- Do I have tissues, water, or grounding tools?
- Have I chosen my opening words?
- Do I have a closing ritual or final card ready?
- Do I feel steady enough to hold space even if it gets emotional?

Final Thought

You're not just running a game.

You're giving people a moment to be real. A pause in the noise. A taste of what connection can feel like when it's intentional.

You're holding space for honesty, courage, and presence.

That's rare. That's human. That's enough.

Trust the process.

Trust the group.

Trust yourself.

Appendix

Glossary – Key Concepts at a Glance

Term	What It Means
Story Cards	Prompts for players to share something real. Come in 4 levels.
Appreciation Cards	Mini "thank yous" that players give to each other after meaningful shares. Also give gameplay boosts.
Doors	Emotional/group challenges that players "break through" by spending points. Symbolic and strategic.
Energy Meter	Group battery. If it runs out, the game ends. Keeps momentum.
Levels	The emotional intensity of story cards:
Light → Warm →Deep	Types of depth in the cards
Champion Card	Marks the last person that broke a door successfully.

Facilitator	That's you. You don't run the game. You hold the space for it.
Safe Space Agreements	Group rules co-created at the start to set the tone for kindness, listening, and consent.



When someone is unsure:

"You don't have to go deep. Just be real."

When it gets too heavy:

"Let's take a breath before the next one."

When someone cries:

"Thanks for sharing that. We're here with you."

When someone jokes during a deep moment:

"Sometimes when things hit, we laugh. Let's still hold space."

When you freeze:

"I'm going to take a moment and reset."

When someone wants to pass:

"That's okay. Knowing your boundary is a strength."

Quick Guide to Card Types





Story Cards

- Face-down = Points
- Flipped = Prompts
- The deeper the level, the higher the reward
- Draw more cards equal to the number on the card you played

Appreciation Cards



- Given after a story
- Played anytime (check effect on each)
- 3 cards for one story = +1 energy for group
- Max you can hold face-up = 5

Doors



- Require points to "break"
- Solo = only one player can do it
- Group = team effort (pool points)
- Fail = lose energy & possibility to replace the door card



 Succeed = progress + rewards (sometimes more energy or points)

Energy Meter



- Starts at 5
- Lose 1 if no door is broken in a full round
- Gain 1 if someone receives 3 appreciation cards
- When it hits 0 = game over

Thampion Marker Card





- It is given to the first player at the beginning of the game.
- It is passed to the player who successfully breaks a door.
- If a turn has gone around and reaches the person holding the card and he doesn't manage to break a door, lose one energy point.

Closing Words

Facilitation is never about being perfect. It's about being present.

If you've read this far, you already know: the cards are just an excuse. The real game is the courage to show up, listen like it matters, and let people be a little more human together.

You don't need to fix anything.

You don't need to impress anyone.

You just need to hold the space — steady, open, real.

Every time you run ConnectiON Vibes, you're giving people something rare: a chance to step out of small talk, out of performance, and into belonging.

That's no small gift.

So take a breath. Trust yourself. Trust the group.

And remember: one story at a time is enough.

Thank you for being brave enough to make connection happen.

— The ConnectiON Vibes Team

Stay Connected

Want to share your experience, ask questions, or explore more tools?

We'd love to hear from you.

Follow the Project

Instagram: @connectionvibes.eu

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/connectionvibes.eu

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