



**PROMOTION
OF ART PRACTICE
in the
MENTAL HEALTH FIELD**

2017







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on behalf of **Fundacion Intrus** for **NEFELE** project

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Networking European
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Enhancement

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NEFELE project (Networking European Festivals for mEntal Life Enhancement) aims to strengthen all kinds of artistic creation connected with the field of Mental Health in order to:

- a) fight Stigma to benefit people suffering from mental disorders as well as the society as a whole
- b) broaden the cultural activities for the benefit of artists
- c) enrich therapeutic procedures

The objectives of the project are:

- The organization of the 1st European pilot Art Festival focused on Mental Health in Athens, Greece - October 2016
- The establishment of a European Network of Art Festivals for Mental Health, which will be held at the Founding Conference in January 2017 in Athens, Greece
- The development of tools which will support the use of Arts in the field of Mental Health

The core concept of the NEFELE project is:

- to promote the establishment of Festivals connecting Arts with Mental health in countries where there is no such activity and to enhance festivals that already running
- to encourage the participation of artists and create new professional opportunities
- to promote the participation of the authorities which are relevant to the field and to rise up the interest of community
- to assist every effort at a national level that shares common objectives

The project is implemented by a partnership of organizations that come from five EU member countries- Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Lithuania - creating a support arc starting from the northwest of Europe, embracing the European south and reaches the south east end of the European Union. The coordinator of the project is the Greek organization 'Social Cooperative Activities for Vulnerable Groups (K.S.D.E.O.) "EDRA", utilizing its rich experience in the field of Art and Mental Health through the art4more Festival (art4more.org), that is being organised in Greece on an annual basis since 2007. The partner scheme is: K.S.D.E.O. "EDRA"/ Greece, First Fortnight / Ireland, Fundacion Intrus / Spain, Euronet / Italy and ASOK / Lithuania.

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Promotion of Art Practice in the Mental Health Field

Art is a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts – artworks, expressing the author's imaginative or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power.



Art has been used as a means of communicating thoughts and ideas since the start of human history, and although its forms have evolved as much as our own consciousness has, from those first cave wall drawings to the elaborate interpretations of modern art today, it remains a fundamental tool in our learning, understanding, and expression of life - the world around us as well as within.

Art practice in itself has an evident therapeutic effect for any who take part. It is both a relaxing and rewarding hobby and has been shown to reduce stress levels, alleviate clouded thinking and deliver an overall sense of calm, well-being and

awe for the beauty of life. In a world where left brain processes such as logic, analytical thinking, strategic planning and verbal communication are awarded with the highest value and make up most of our mental activity throughout the day, art invites this part of our brain to rest as we allow more creative, non-verbal, feeling-based thought processes to come to the fore. In a society where intellectual intelligence is promoted as the highest form of achievement, and our education systems focus on teaching children how to do mathematical equations before learning how to process emotion and express feeling, it is no wonder we are observing the highest rates of depression and mental dis-ease ever before seen on our planet. Creative endeavors allow us to express experiences and feelings otherwise indescribable in words and enjoy the full spectrum of human experience, not just in black and white, but the entire rainbow of colour, emotion, vision and imagination.

Art as Therapy

The idea that creative expression can powerfully impact a person's recovery from illness and aid in the healing process has been embraced by different cultures around the globe for centuries. Throughout recorded history people have used pictures, stories, dances and chants to express and better accept their illness and motivate themselves towards healing. Its ability to extract the participant from the immediate world of their symptoms and allow them to express and connect with the deeper, perhaps subconscious, elements of their experience, accessing feelings and interpreting their situation from an alternative perspective, has been deemed of great assistance to their overall recovery. Studies have shown that access to art in a hospital setting not only improved patients sense of well-being, but could actually reduce their overall recovery time.



Art has been used in the support and treatment of mental health service users since the 1900s. In the early part of the twentieth century, arts and crafts were used widely as part of the treatment of individuals with mental health issues. The goal-oriented nature of creative tasks such as basket weaving, sewing and woodwork were regarded as having a therapeutic effect and the balance of challenging projects with achievable goals is still to this day deemed a very useful technique in nurturing self-esteem, and feelings of achievement and self-worth, all of which are essential aspects in the recovery of a mental illness. The belief that activity is essential for well-being means keeping active, both physically and mentally, and a holistic approach was at the fore. However, throughout the twentieth century, mental health care was shaped by a more bio-medical approach which focused on pathology, symptom reduction and research into the more physiological aspects of mental illness such as neuroscience and genetics. This caused art therapies to decline as they were not given the same weight as more scientific, medical approaches. Another shift came however in the 1980's with the focus returning to a more holistic bio-psycho-social approach. The idea that mental illness was not a chronic incurable condition, and the rise of a focus on understanding and awareness of what it means to live with mental illness and respect for the wishes of the individual became prevalent. Mental health as an issue of psychological, perceptive and emotional content once again called for the support of artistic therapies and their ability to reach beyond the superficial, symptomatic layer and address the feeling aspect of the condition. Mental illnesses represent a complex interplay of physical, psychological, social and spiritual factors, and are therefore difficult to treat. Art-based practices have attracted increasing interest in this field as they offer a person-centered and recovery-oriented approach that embraces emotional, social and spiritual needs alongside the clinical.

A fundamental aspect of all therapies is to encourage individuals to engage in self-exploration. Expressive therapies, such as art, encourage not only self-exploration, but also use self-expression through one or more modalities as a central part of the therapeutic process. In this way expressive therapies are of utmost value within the mental health field, in particular for individuals with mental health difficulties which limit their ability to express themselves verbally. Whilst

talk therapy remains the most prevalent form of psychotherapy today, it restricts expression solely to that which can be put into words. Emotions and feelings by their very nature tend not to be easily described in this way, as they seep past the conscious thinking part of ourselves and more rooted in the reactive, instinctual aspects of our being. For this reason, when discussing and expressing how it feels to experience a mental illness, or the influencing sensations and reactions which effect ones mental state, art therapies can offer a more accessible language with which to express oneself.

Bringing Back Purpose

For many people a diagnosis of mental illness results in loss of independence, loss of autonomy, and ultimate exclusion from some of the most fundamental aspects of life in society. The World Health Organization recognizes that mental health is not merely the absence of mental health difficulty, but rather that it is "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his/her own potential" and "can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Mental well health therefore relies heavily on inclusion and contribution, a minimum amount of responsibility and purpose, and an overall sense of value within the community. These are aspects of life which the general public often take for granted, but they are rudimentary elements of co-existence as humans. To have a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and prospects for productivity, one must recognize one's own abilities and talents and feel that they are of merit to the world around them. Unfortunately, this is not always the case with people diagnosed with a mental illness. After diagnosis the tendency is to focus on the limitations of the illness, the lack of ability to work in a stressful environment, the lack of ability to express oneself clearly, the lack of control over extreme emotions, the loss of a life they once had. However, in light of the new focus in mental illness recovery not necessarily being on elimination of symptoms, or trying to make the person fit into elements of a world which do not suit their

specific perspective on life, but rather recognizing and living with the symptoms, and constructing a fulfilling, comfortable and productive life, understanding and working with the individual towards a target or goal has become the desired approach to rehabilitation.

Many mental healthcare units are now attempting to return autonomy to their patients by not only including them in the decision making process for their specific care and treatment, but also by asking them to consider where they see themselves in the future, setting specific targets and goals such as living back in the community, reentering the workforce, or even simply attending events that they used to enjoy, and then constructing a clear plan and means of achieving those goals. As with anyone, planning a future is often difficult, and takes honest introspection and awareness of desires, and is always subject to change. Most young people have a certain idea of what their life will be when they reach a certain age, however, the reality is usually very different! Projecting oneself into the future and believing in the possible accomplishment of certain goals is an incredible driving force and motivation for participation, not only in rehabilitation, but in life in general. Adequate support and tailor-made plans specific to the individual are paramount to the success of reaching these goals. Targets set should remain realistic but should never be limited or restricted by perceived prejudices about the individual's abilities or possibility for realization solely due to them having a diagnosis of mental illness.

Restructure not Restriction

One of the benefits of living in a world with over seven billion people, is that each of us have different perspectives, interests and talents to bring to the table, and we can constantly learn from one another. However, the first step in being able to offer one's personal gifts to the world, is recognizing and cultivating these talents. Unfortunately, recognition and realization of these individual aptitudes often takes a backseat to pursuits of excellence in the somewhat limited yet more highly valued fields that make up our progress-oriented society, and with money being rated as one of the highest motivations for choosing a career path, some people never get



the chance to explore other aspects of their natural capacity. In a world where innovation and ground-breaking advancements are at the heart of all major progress, people like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are putting creativity and

lateral thinking at the center of their focus for employees. Validity in the workforce no longer relies solely on intellectual prowess or ability to comply with company policy, but rather values experience, vision and inventive input as essential elements to any growing business.

Being diagnosed with a mental illness which may restrict one from participating in some conventional career paths is often seen as a negative element, however a slight change in perspective can transform this view into something far more positive. Being diagnosed with a mental illness is nothing more than the realization that a person's mind has a tendency to think, analyze and interpret the world around them differently from the common perception. These differences should be valued as equally if not more precious than the abilities of the average mind. As with all human beings, it is the application of our individual perspective to any task which can transform it beyond what has already been done. These positive differences in thinking and perception of people with alternative mental make-up's should be explored, expanded and expressed through productive pathways specific to the individual's interests and talents.

Like with any other chronic illness, a diagnosis of mental illness requires a reassessment and restructuring of one's life. Certain aspects which were at one time deemed central to a person's every-day life, may have to take a backseat or temporarily cease altogether, in favour of pursuits which better fit with one's current mental state. However, this should not be seen as solely a loss. It provides the person with the opportunity to explore other avenues of productivity and develop talents and interests which perhaps went unnoticed in the past. One of these avenues could be in the creative field. Music, art, theatre, literature, and dance, offer many opportunities for introspection, communication, healing and success.

Mental Health and Creativity

The idea of the “tortured artist” and the link between mental illness and the production of great works of art is a legend that has circulated in this field for thousands of years. Some of the art world’s greatest geniuses, Mozart, Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, among many more, not only suffered from mental illnesses, but have even accredited these altered states of thinking and extreme emotional experience with some of their most famous works. Just a quick glance at the most highly esteemed artists of our time will reveal extremely high records of depression, bipolar and schizophrenia amongst them. Why is there such a seemingly solid link between creativity and mental illness?





One possible answer to this question is in the very brain chemistry of an artist, which has many similarities to that of some mental illnesses. In schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, neurological studies have found notably high activity in the frontal lobe, the main connection between the temporal and parietal lobe, which is the part of the brain which deals with knowledge and concepts. It is hyperactivity in this area, in particular the prefrontal cortex, which can lead to delusions or hallucinations, as typically found in schizophrenia and manic depression. Artists and people with higher abilities in creative thinking have also been shown to display high levels of activity in this area.

Our accumulated experience of life and the structured beliefs we form due to these experiences, are what allow us to hold a very stable concrete view of the world around us, this is what gives us our grip on "reality". However, during times of mental illness, hyperactivity in this section of the brain may allow us to draw conclusions or come up with ideas that completely contradict the general world view, connect seemingly unrelated occurrences, and this is often where the panic, paranoia, dis-ease, and erratic behavior comes in. This disconnect from the usual view we have of the world, which has existed and been seemingly unchanging throughout our lives, can be very upsetting and challenging to deal with for someone suffering from a mental illness. The lack of reference points or ability to think as you usually would, in a clear, logical manner can be frightening. However, it is this lack of left brain thinking, this shift from analytical, which focuses on taking things apart and looking at them separately, to analogical, which is the thought process of dreams, and allows links to be made between seemingly unrelated concepts based on small similarities, which allows the delusions of the mentally ill to occur, but also the creation of new ideas, visions unrestricted by the laws of reality, and ultimately lets the mind wander into territory unreachable by the everyday restricted thought processes of the left brain. In the "9-5" oriented, capitalist society of the Western world, this form of thinking is not easily accepted in everyday life. It brings with it a whole host of difficulties to deal with such as erratic speech, sporadic activity and lack of clarity or defined purpose, which does not integrate well in an average working environment. However, in the art world, it is possible to create astounding works of art due to an expansive mind,

and this work not be disturbed by the alterations in perceived reality, as it is not necessary to conform to accepted forms of behavior whilst creating art. It does not comply to set working hours, or require a quiet demeanor, the creation of great artwork solely requires vision, imagination, motivation and technical skill.

Recognizing Talent and Exploring Interests

Going from perhaps enjoying a monthly visit to an art gallery, to envisioning oneself as a professional artist with a career in the arts, is somewhat of a leap for anyone to make, let alone someone who is learning to live with a mental illness. However, interest and enjoyment, as well as potentiality and aptitude, can be explored from a very informal setting, starting on a small scale with basic art classes. Exploration into the arts can be a daunting prospect, especially for those who have never deemed it a valuable option. For many adults today, painting and drawing were past-times enjoyed only up until the age where reading, writing and other intellectual pursuits became central to their learning. As such, for some people, a certain amount of fear may come with beginning to produce artwork, as most of our endeavors in other areas are scrutinized and valued based on a specific scale of merit. For this reason an introduction to art void of specifications or level of competency is absolutely necessary. The primary focus should be on enjoyment. Providing a safe space whereby one can begin to explore the many facets and possibilities available through creativity. Optimally a wide range of mediums would be available to provide the participant with as many options for expression as possible, as not every medium will suit everyone and art has many outlets to offer, from painting and sculpture, to ceramics and textiles and even photography and cinematics. If someone finds a connection with a certain form of creativity, if they find it interesting, challenging, enjoyable and want to delve deeper into either the more technical or expressive elements, then more structure or direction can be offered. It is often at this point that art therapy can become an option, moving slightly deeper into the thought processes behind the creations and using the art as a tool to work through or examine more difficult ideas or

emotions. It is through this explorative work that people can really find an outlet in the arts. For many it offers a release and unburdening of thoughts or experiences which had been held internally for many years, unable to be communicated through other forms.

A great example of this process in action is artist Timothy Hyunsoo Lee, and how he used his art to finally express the trauma he experienced as a child, being raised with dual heritage, and the anxiety and depression that affected him later in life. Lee was born in Seoul, South Korea, and lived there until the age of five, when his family decided to move to New York City. Whilst some of his family members adjusted well, thriving in their new environment, the culture shock and lack of stability had a profound effect on him and he suffered night terrors and panic



attacks from an early age. Living with diagnosed panic and anxiety disorders became almost unbearable until he decided to take a break from the academic pressure he was under whilst studying neuroscience, and spend more time working on his art. Whilst this decision was difficult for his family to accept, the progress he made in understanding and processing his past and subsequent emotions was astounding. Lee used his art as a form of talk therapy, he spoke to himself. Whilst creating pieces of art he was able to not only express how he was feeling, but also assess and work through earlier trauma from a less intense standpoint, in the back of his mind, whilst remaining calm and focused on what he was creating. Today, Lee is a practicing artist and has his own studio whilst series of his artwork such as "Mania Edition" and "Portraits of anxiety I" have been displayed in galleries in Madrid, he has also won numerous awards including the International Emerging Artist Award in Dubai.

Entering the Art World: Encouragement, Involvement, Integration



Once someone has started to exhibit a keen interest, clear aptitude and thorough enjoyment in their process of creation, they can be supported in taking their art further and considering making art with a defined purpose. Holding local art exhibitions, first within a more comfortable setting, either within a mental health unit or art center, and then branching out into the local art community. Local galleries can be contacted and asked if they would like to support local artists (with mental health issues) in promoting their art. Exhibitions open to the public, with other local artists and stakeholders in the local art community could be invited. Introduction and integration into the general art world should be the aim, and that artists with mental health issues have equal access and standing within the art community. This is also an opportunity to present artists with mental health issues in a positive light and breakdown any current prejudices.

As with any new venture, talking to other people who have succeed in the same field can offer great insight and provide enhancing learning experiences. Making friends within the art community is a wonderful support for all budding artists. Speaking to people with the same passion as you is not only stimulating and motivating but can offer opportunities for constructive criticism from those in the know, sharing of techniques and experiences, and inspiration from seeing other people's ideas and creations. Online art communities too can offer great support and connection to the art environment, locally as well as globally. Sharing of different cultural views and historical approaches to art can once again only serve to enhance and expand a new artist's horizons. Once an artist has found secure footing within their local art community, mobility of the artist should be encouraged. Europe offers some of the world's best art galleries and finest works of art, visiting and learning about these should be a fundamental part of any artist's journey.

There are many fine examples of working artist's with mental health issues who have achieved success within the art world in recent years. Conventions, talks and correspondence with these artists could be of great encouragement and support to up-and-coming artists. Internships with practicing artists are a great way for those who are interested to gain specific insights and learning experiences. Working closely with a professional artist in a particular medium, as a studio assistant or model, can be one of the best ways to learn about the medium. It also gives a direct link into the inner circle of the artist community. Part-time or full-time work in a gallery or museum is also another great way to integrate and begin forming a life within the art world. Being surrounded by great works of art is not only inspirational, but provides a constant learning experience and access to further knowledge.

An example of this is the "Guide for a Day" project run by INTRAS Foundation, in Valladolid, Spain. A group of art enthusiasts, who attend one of the foundation's daycare centers, were offered the opportunity to get an inside look at what it is like to work at one of the city's largest museums, El Museo Nacional de Escultura (The National Museum of Sculpture).

Project

Quand l'art sert d'union

Quand l'art sert d'union est un projet éducatif réalisé par le musée national de Sculpture de Valladolid avec le soutien de la FONDATION INTRAS, dans lequel 4 personnes souffrant de détresse mentale sont formées pour travailler en tant que guides de musée pour une journée.



They began the project by attending training sessions at the museum, hosted by current guides and facilitators, and learning about the different works of art on exhibition there. They also learned about the layout of the museum, the best routes to take whilst showing the artwork, the restoration and presentation of the pieces, rules and regulations within the museum and all of the information usually restricted from the general public. Once they had oriented themselves comfortably with this information, they began training on how to guide a group through the museum. The trainings eventually culminated in service users guiding a group through the museum and presenting the works of art.

PROMOTION OF ART PRACTICE IN THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELD



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