



THE ROLES OF PERFORMANCE ARTS & EXHIBITION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES



Recreation for Mental Health is an initiative designed to strengthen partnerships, enhance capacity, and create supportive environments to enable all Nova Scotians to have opportunities to experience the mental wellbeing benefits of recreation, physical activity, sport, and play.

This project is a collaboration between Recreation Nova Scotia (RNS), Dalhousie University and the Canadian Mental Health Association (Nova Scotia), which was funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness.

To view this and other research project summaries online, visit:
recreationns.ns.ca/mental-health-and-recreation

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WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO DO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Many arts activities (e.g., drawing, painting, writing, dancing, etc.) are enjoyable and have long been linked with positive mental health. This research focused on the perspectives of people living with mental health challenges and their perspectives on the role and value of arts activities in their lives.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT GOAL?

The goal of this project was to explore the role of arts activities in supporting recovery in mental health, from the perspectives of people living with mental health challenges.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT DONE?

Participants for this study were recruited from among the 25 artists who submitted art or performed spoken word, theatre, comedy or music at Project Make, an arts show for artists with "first voice" experience (i.e., lived experience of mental illness). This study included six individual interviews and analysis of short, 250-word narratives from 19 participant artists describing the role of the arts in their mental health. In the interviews and through the narratives, research participants described the process of creating the particular work that they shared at Project Make, the meaning associated with this art and other arts activities in which they were involved, and their interpretation of how their involvement in the arts supported recovery for them.

WHY SHOULD YOU KEEP READING?

This project highlights the potential for the arts to provide a sense of continuity during times of change, a means of connecting with others to share experiences related to mental health challenges, and to raise awareness of issues related to mental health.

WHAT WERE KEY FINDINGS?

Participants in this study described how creative expression through the arts supported their mental health by (1) providing structure and continuity; (2) allowing them to tell personal stories; and (3) making connections. These findings are described below:

PROVIDING STRUCTURE:

Participation in the arts provided people with flexible opportunities to structure their time. Arts also provided a sense of continuity and stability when there were many other life changes. One person said that routine involvement in the arts provided a 'work-like' structure that helped them to avoid the stigma associated with unemployment. For others, independent arts activities such as writing or drawing did not require many supplies and thus were a "dependable" presence in participants' lives. One participant said:

"I'm not going to have to stop doing this. If I don't have money I don't have to stop doing it, if I don't [have] friends. It's just something that's always there for me."

TELLING PERSONAL STORIES:

Through the creative process, participants reflected on, composed, and told their personal stories. Participants talked about using the arts to temporarily escape difficult life circumstances, to process their thoughts and experiences, and to construct their identities as artists. At times, participants addressed difficult life circumstances or negative perspectives on mental illness by telling an alternative story of hope or countering stigma through their art. One participant shared:

"When someone does a painting, do you say that it was just that time that they did the painting? No, it is everything, who they are, it's who they can be, it's who they want to be, it's what they went through"

BUILDING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

Participants connected with family, friends, and community through their art, which helped them to feel a sense of belonging to community, seek and provide support, raise awareness about mental illness, and sometimes served as a stepping stone to other opportunities. One participant stated:

"Through creating art about my thoughts around mental health, I was able to meet a really amazing community of people that validated my experiences, and allowed me to gain confidence instead of discriminating against myself for aspects of my mental health-related identity"

HOW CAN READERS USE THESE FINDINGS?

These findings reinforce the value of the arts and arts-based mental health groups for supporting recovery, providing a strong rationale for supporting such groups.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

Participants in this study found a strong sense of community and comradeship with arts-based mental health communities, suggesting that these groups are important means of giving and providing social support and community for people living with mental health challenges. These groups also supported people in addressing difficult topics and challenging stigma related to mental illness. Through public performance in the arts, the participants in our research used the arts to share their stories in a way that both challenged themselves and their audience members to see them and not just their mental illnesses.