

NAS Conference 26 June 2019:
Adults and Autism

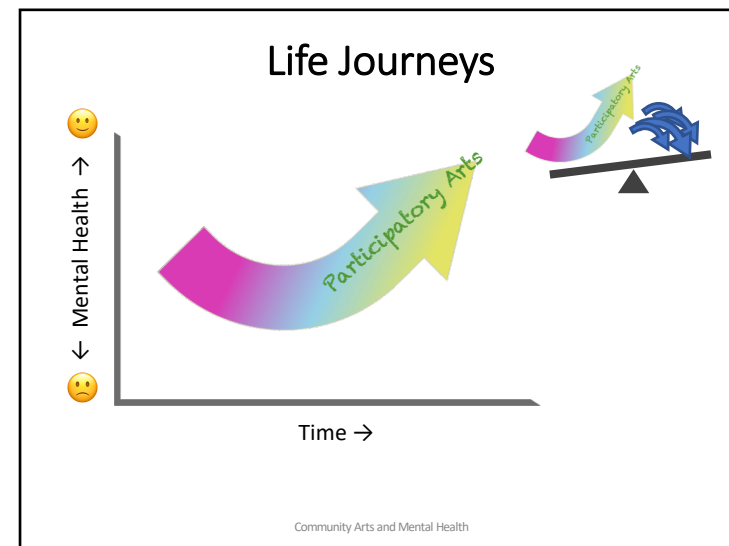
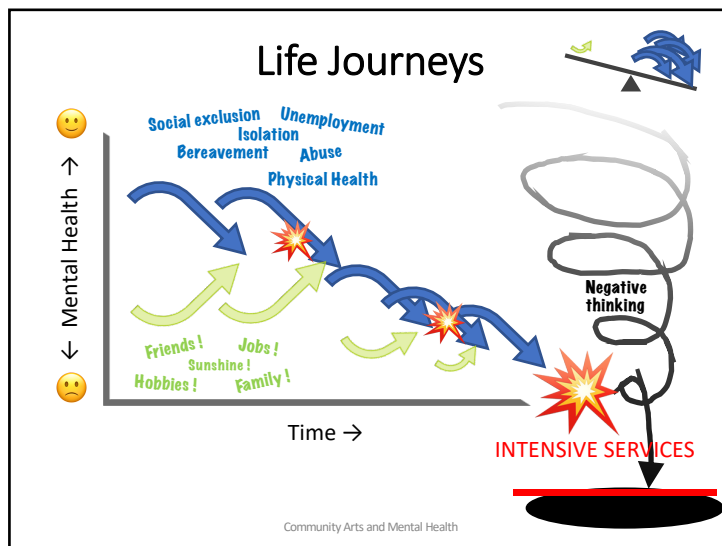
Mental health support through community arts: One autistic user's perspective

Contributors:
Susan Franceschi (speaker), Alison Bowry, Sheila ... and,
- across the spectrum of neurodiversity -
all participants of **Project eARTH**
high peak community arts

AIMS

1. Highlight the **value** of community arts for **adult mental health**
2. Examine the **relevance to autistic people** – one autistic user's perspective
3. Consider some **wider implications**

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Introducing Project eARTh

Partnership between:

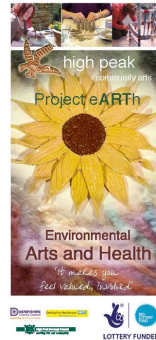
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High Peak Community Mental Health Team

High Peak Mental Health Project (Glossop)

High Peak Council for Voluntary Services

Funded by



Project 1 ran 2010 – 15. Project 2 now running 2015 – 20.

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Context: **high peak community arts**

Arts, Health and Wellbeing

1. **Project eARTh** – adults experiencing mental distress or other long term conditions

2. **Creative Wellbeing** – homeless women, including those escaping domestic violence; and women in recovery from drug / alcohol dependency

3. **Together Through Art** - for elders



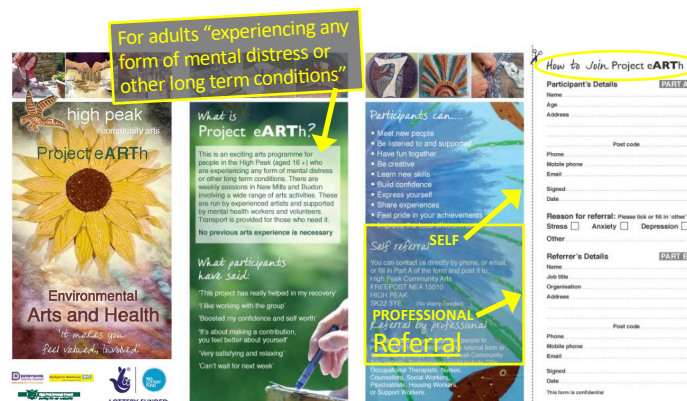
and... **FILM CUTS CLUB** for teenagers*

*Many are on the autistic spectrum

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Project eARTh: Leaflet

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Autism Relevant Benefits 1:

SENSORY EXPERIENCES

Cake! 🍰

Sounds and smells



Textures / Materials



Colour

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Benefits 2: SAFE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Community venue tapestry

"Sharing
Friendship
Support
Creativity
Inspiring
Love"
...and "Trust"

The words woven into the weaving are what the Group means to us

Professional Team work at each session

- An experienced, professional artist
- Mental health support workers
- Volunteers
- (Often) the project co-ordinator

This creates a safe, welcoming environment for participants.

Autistic relevance:
ACCESSIBLE SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Benefits 3: SHARING and SELF-ESTEEM

- Confidence
- Team work
- Belonging
- Friendships

"We are respected so included in the Steering Group"

Autistic relevance:
INCLUSIVITY

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Benefits 3: SHARING and SELF-ESTEEM

- Giving to the outside community

REUBEN'S RETREAT

Launches – Celebration!



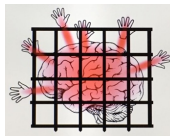
- Media coverage
- Schools and other VIP's
- Pride in achievements



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Project eARTh - Benefits 4: PERSONAL JOURNEYS


- **Non-verbal expression** - reflective/traumatic themes
- **Outward looking**
 - Feeds thirsty, branching neurons!
 - Distraction from negative thinking
 - Sense of liberty
- **Further support options** – ‘informal’ access to mental health team



Autistic relevance:
SENSORY COMMUNICATION
SPECIAL INTERESTS
Enjoyment of DETAIL

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Project eARTh Different Participants' Voices



"On occasion I thought of myself as the Phoenix sticking its head out of the flames"

"Boosted my confidence and self worth"


"It's about making a contribution..."

"I like working with the group"

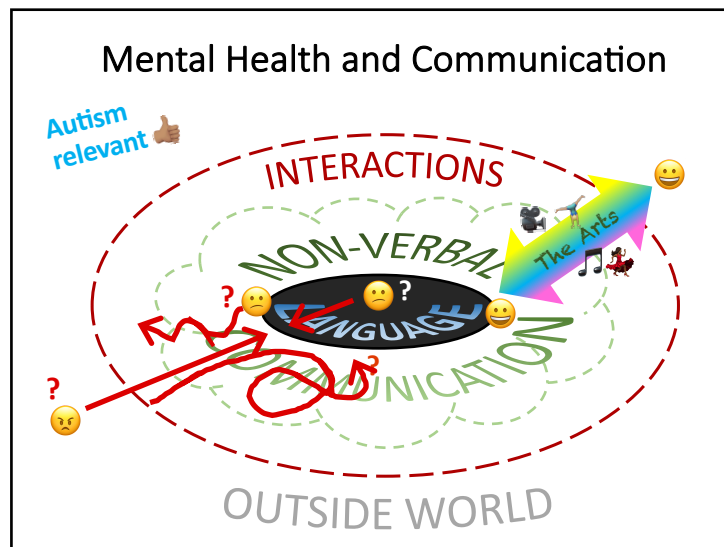
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Project eARTh: Monitoring and Evaluation

- Individual baseline interviews and regular reviews with all participants
- Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
- Weekly evaluation sheets
- Project Journals
- Project discussions and evaluations
- Yearly reports and Final Evaluation Report, with case studies
- The project 2015 – 20, is being evaluated externally by Professor Theo Stickley of Nottingham University



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Focus on COMMUNICATION

Central to so many issues for autistic people

- **Non-verbal expression**
 - Show/do
- **Trusting, inclusive environment**
 - Opportunities to explore, clarify or test interactions with other people
 - Mutual respect
 - Confidence building



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*WIDER IMPLICATIONS: AUTISM

- **Participatory Arts** for diagnosed and undiagnosed autistic people - **sustains positive impacts** on the lives of individuals
- **Scale and Society**
 - Non-verbal **communication strategies**: a wider range is VITAL for crisis situations in mental health
 - Develop more sensory methods – **RESEARCH / TEST**
 - Train more people in these communication methods
 - Political decision-making
 - Education policy – **IMPORTANCE of DIVERSE ARTS** in the curriculum
 - Importance for **HEALTH and EMPLOYMENT** futures



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* Author's perspective
(S. Franceschi)

CONCLUSIONS

- Key features of **Project eARTh** serve very well as a **model of good practice** for 'low-level' mental health interventions
- Participatory arts can **mitigate escalation** towards the need for intensive mental health services
- **Autistic people** ✅👍 **Everyone** ✅👍

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