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ARTWELL BOOKLET
**ART ACTIVITIES FOR
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**

Selected practices for youth workers and educators

INTRODUCTION

The booklet presents a collection of art-based practices for youth well-being and self-care, bringing together best national experiences from Hungary. It is designed to support educators, youth workers, trainers, artists, and civil society organisations who work with young people and are seeking meaningful, accessible ways to address emotional well-being through non-formal education.

The activities included in this booklet were developed and tested in workshops aimed at providing marginalised young people with opportunities for self-expression and emotional exploration through art. They introduce practical self-care tools grounded in creative processes and offer alternatives to social media-induced isolation by encouraging real-life connection, embodied experience, and shared creative spaces.

At the core of each activity is the intention to create a safe and inclusive environment where young people can express themselves freely, explore their inner world, and develop self-help strategies that can be carried into everyday life.

This booklet is developed as a result of the ArtWell project, implemented with the support of the Erasmus+ programme. The project responds to one of the most pressing challenges affecting young people today: the lack of accessible mental health education, combined with increasing stress levels and persistent societal stigma surrounding mental illness.

Through international cooperation and shared learning, the ArtWell project explores how artistic and creative methods can be used as practical, inclusive tools for promoting youth well-being across different cultural and social contexts.

1 ACTIVITY

DANCE YOUR EMOTIONS

Artistic methods applied: dance, movement improvisation.

Well-being areas supported: emotional expression, stress release, embodiment, self-awareness, emotional regulation, social connection, confidence.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

- Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is recognised as an effective approach for supporting emotional expression, stress reduction, and body awareness (Koch et al., 2019 – meta-analysis on dance movement therapy).
- Embodiment theory highlights that emotions are experienced and processed through the body, not only cognitively; movement can therefore support emotional integration and regulation.
- Van der Kolk (2014) emphasises that body-based practices help release stored tension and emotions that are difficult to access verbally (*The Body Keeps the Score*).
- Group movement practices have been shown to strengthen social bonding, trust, and a sense of belonging through shared rhythm and synchronisation.

Materials needed:

- Speaker or portable sound system.
- Phone or laptop with prepared playlist.
- Spacious room with open floor.
- Optional: mirrors (for comfort).
- Water bottles or access to drinking water.
- Comfortable clothing for participants.
- First aid kit.

Estimated preparation time: 15–20 minutes (space preparation, sound check, playlist setup).

Recommended group size: 10–20 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a spacious, safe room with an open floor. The space should allow participants to move freely, rest when needed, and feel comfortable expressing themselves.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): the facilitator explains the workshop plan and introduces the main idea of travelling through countries using music and movement. Emphasise that the session is not about dance technique, but about listening to the body and expressing emotions.

Participants are invited to say their names and name one country they dream of visiting, creating openness and curiosity from the start. The facilitator reinforces acceptance, encouragement, and freedom of expression.

Main steps of the activity:

10' – ARRIVAL AND WARM-UP

Gentle stretching, breathing exercises, shoulder rolls, and simple steps to help participants arrive in their bodies. Emphasise that there are no rules and that every movement is valid.

40' – TRAVELLING THROUGH COUNTRIES

The facilitator selects 5–6 countries and plays traditional or well-known music from each one in turn.

For each country:

- The facilitator briefly introduces the country, typical movements, dances, and emotional qualities of the music.

- Participants dance freely, following their own impulses.
- If participants are from the country being played and wish to do so, they can show traditional movements.
- Others are invited to repeat, adapt, or improvise as they feel.

Participants are reminded to take breaks for water or rest whenever needed.

After each dance, the facilitator asks short reflection questions:

- How did your body feel during this dance?
- What emotions did you notice?

10' – DANCE WITHOUT BORDERS

A neutral song is played, introduced as a “dance without borders”. Participants are invited to move freely, without cultural references, simply following their body and emotions. The facilitator encourages slowing down, enjoying the moment, and staying present.

20' – REFLECTION AND CLOSURE

Participants gather in a reflection circle. Each participant is invited to share:

- How they felt before, during, and after the workshop.
- Which country’s dance felt closest to them.
- How their body responded to moving without rules.

Optionally, participants can show one movement or say one word that reflects their current state.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- Did you notice any emotional shifts while dancing?
- How could movement support your well-being in everyday life?

Approaches used to create an environment that prioritises expression over skill:

- Repeatedly reinforce that no one is a professional and no one is expected to be.
- Normalise rest, stillness, and small movements.
- Avoid demonstrating “correct” steps.
- Use encouraging, inclusive language (“move as your body wishes”).

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: frame movement as an accessible tool for releasing stress, reconnecting with the body, and experiencing joy. Encourage participants to see dance as a resource for emotional regulation, not as performance.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described feeling cheerful, energised, calm, and deeply immersed in the process. Many highlighted a strong sense of flow, emotional release, and connection with their bodies while dancing.

Participant quotes:

“At first I thought I wouldn’t succeed because I wasn’t a professional dancer, but then I realised that no one is a professional and this meeting is about experiencing a journey and emotions. In the end, I felt cheerful and full of energy.”

“I was calm, in the flow, and fully enjoyed the atmosphere. I felt connected to my body and released my emotions through movement.”

“After the workshop, I wanted to go dancing more because it gives me a sense of freedom and happiness.”

2 ACTIVITY

DESIGN ON CANVAS

Artistic methods applied: painting, design.

Well-being areas supported: self-expression, emotional awareness, stress reduction, mindfulness, self-esteem, identity exploration.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Creative visual art activities are widely recognised as effective tools for supporting mental well-being and emotional regulation.

- Art-making and mindfulness support stress reduction and emotional regulation by engaging focused attention, and sensory awareness (Kaimal et al., 2016).
- Colour psychology suggests that colours influence emotional states and self-perception, supporting reflection on mood and inner needs.
- Cathy Malchiodi (2012) highlights that creating tangible art objects supports identity expression and self-esteem (Handbook of Art Therapy).
- Engaging in meaningful, hands-on creative work has been linked to reduced anxiety and increased feelings of competence and pride.

Materials needed:

- Cotton eco-bags.
- Acrylic paints or special textile paints.
- Paintbrushes of different sizes.
- Sponges.
- Palettes or disposable plates for mixing colours.
- Jars of water for rinsing brushes.

- Napkins or cloths for wiping tools.
- Cardboard or paper (to place inside bags so paint does not seep through).
- Sketching pencils.
- Scotch tape (for creating lines or shapes).
- Aprons or protective clothing.

Estimated preparation time: 15–25 minutes (space setup, material organisation, paint preparation).

Recommended group size: 10–20 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a calm, well-lit space with tables, access to water, and enough room for participants to work comfortably and move around.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): the facilitator welcomes participants and explains the purpose of the workshop: self-expression through creative design and mindful painting. Emphasise respect, kindness, and freedom of expression.

Participants are invited to introduce themselves by sharing their name and one colour that reflects their current mood.

Main steps of the activity:

15' – INTRODUCTION AND MATERIALS PRESENTATION

The facilitator presents the tote bags and paints, explains how acrylic textile paints work (long-lasting, washable), and demonstrates different techniques (brushes, sponges, stencils, freehand drawing). Participants are reassured that all styles are welcome.

15' – DESIGN IMAGINATION AND SKETCHING

Participants are invited to take a few quiet minutes to imagine their design. They are encouraged to think about symbols, colours, words, or patterns that represent their emotions, values, or identity. Light sketching on paper or directly on the bag is optional.

90' – MINDFUL PAINTING PROCESS

Participants begin painting their eco-bags. Relaxing background music is played. The facilitator moves around the room, offering support and encouragement, reinforcing process over perfection and inviting slow, mindful painting.

20' – SHARING AND REFLECTION

When most participants have finished, the facilitator invites those who feel comfortable to share their bags. Simple reflection questions are asked, and positive peer feedback is encouraged.

5' – CLOSURE AND PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The facilitator thanks participants, explains drying time and care instructions for the bags, and highlights the sustainability aspect – participants now have a reusable bag carrying their own story.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- What does your design represent for you?
- How did you feel during the painting process?
- Which colours or symbols felt most meaningful?

Approaches used to create an environment that prioritises expression over skill:

- Repeatedly remind participants that perfection is not the goal.
- Use supportive language and affirm creative choices.
- Encourage working at a slow, personal pace.
- Normalise experimentation and mistakes.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: frame the activity as a mindful practice that supports emotional regulation, self-awareness, and self-esteem. Emphasise that creative expression can be a healthy way to process stress and emotions.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described feeling calm, focused, and immersed during the creative process. Many shared that painting their eco-bag felt relaxing and therapeutic, allowing them to release stress and express themselves freely. Participants also reported a sense of satisfaction and pride in creating something personal and tangible.

Participant quotes:

“Painting my eco-bag felt like therapy. The colours helped me feel grounded and balanced.”

“I came stressed, but mixing colours and painting symbols that represent me helped release tension.”

“I didn’t think I could relax and draw, but doing it just for myself was very expressive.”

3 ACTIVITY

WRITING WITHOUT A MAP

Artistic methods applied: creative writing, freewriting, storytelling, poetry.

Well-being areas supported: emotional expression, emotional release, self-awareness, reflection, stress reduction, self-compassion, social connection.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Writing-based expressive practices are widely recognised as effective tools for emotional processing and mental well-being.

- Expressive writing research (Pennebaker & Chung) shows that writing about emotions and personal experiences supports emotional regulation, stress reduction, and improved mood.
- Narrative approaches highlight that storytelling helps individuals organise experiences, externalise emotions, and make meaning from personal events.
- Short poetic forms (such as senkan or haiku-like structures) support emotional clarity by encouraging concise reflection and focused expression.
- Group sharing of creative writing can enhance empathy and reduce feelings of isolation through shared vulnerability.

Materials needed:

- Paper or notebooks.
- Pens.
- Flipchart and markers.
- Role cards (e.g. traveller, teacher, tree, river, lost key, dreamer).
- Calm background music.

Estimated preparation time: 10–15 minutes.

Recommended group size: 8–20 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a calm, cosy space that supports concentration and emotional safety. Chairs arranged in a circle or around tables are recommended.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): the facilitator introduces writing as a tool for emotional expression rather than performance. Emphasise that grammar, structure, and “good writing” are not important. The focus is honesty, freedom, and curiosity.

Participants introduce themselves by sharing their name, previous experience with writing (if any), and one word describing how they feel today. The facilitator writes these words on a flipchart, creating a collective “map of feelings”.

Main steps of the activity:

10' – FREEWRITING WARM-UP

Participants write continuously for 7–10 minutes without stopping or editing. Suggested prompts (choose one):

➤➤ “I remember...”

➤➤ “Today I feel...”

➤➤ “If I were a colour, I would be...”

20' – ROLE-BASED STORYTELLING

Each participant receives or chooses a character role (e.g. traveller, tree, river, lost key). Participants write a short story (10 minutes) from the perspective of this character.

They then pair up:

- Read stories to each other.
- Connect their characters into a shared mini-story.

2–3 pairs present their joint stories to the group.

25' – CREATIVE GROUP WRITING: SENKAN POEMS

The facilitator explains the senkan structure:

- One word – the topic.
- Two words – adjectives.
- Three words – actions.
- Four words – a phrase expressing meaning.
- One word – summary or synonym.

Participants write their senkans and volunteers read them aloud.

15' – REFLECTION AND CLOSURE

Participants sit in a circle and reflect:

- What did you discover about yourself today while writing?

Each participant shares one word describing how they feel now. The facilitator highlights that writing can be a daily self-care tool and thanks the group for openness and trust.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- Was it easier to express emotions through a character or directly?
- How did your emotional state change during the workshop?
- What surprised you in your own writing?

Approaches used to create an environment that prioritises expression over skill:

- Repeatedly emphasise “no editing, no perfection”.
- Normalise silence and emotional pauses.
- Encourage authenticity over structure.
- Avoid critique, respond with appreciation only.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: frame writing as a safe outlet for emotions, reflection, and self-support. Encourage participants to use freewriting or short poems as a way to process feelings outside the workshop.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described feeling calm, supported, and emotionally engaged during the workshop. Many shared that writing helped them access personal memories and emotions in a gentle way. Several participants noted a sense of emotional release, inspiration, and lightness after the session.

Participant quotes:

“Free writing opened up something inside me I didn’t expect. It felt like discovering a new inner voice.”

“Sharing my lines was emotional, but it made me feel less alone.”

“Writing became a safe space to express things I usually keep quiet.”

“I left feeling lighter and inspired.”



THREADING EMOTIONS

Artistic methods applied: string art/filography.

Well-being areas supported: emotional expression and release, stress reduction, mindfulness, concentration, patience, self-esteem, grounding.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Tactile and repetitive art-making processes are widely recognised as supportive tools for mental well-being and emotional regulation.

- Mindfulness-based art activities promote focus, emotional regulation, and stress reduction through repetitive, attentive actions (Kaimal et al., 2016).
- Somatic and sensorimotor approaches highlight that working with hands and physical materials supports grounding and emotional release by engaging the nervous system (van der Kolk, 2014).
- Cathy Malchiodi (2012) emphasises that structured, hands-on art processes increase self-efficacy and emotional containment (Handbook of Art Therapy).
- Repetitive creative actions (hammering, threading) have been linked to calming effects similar to meditative practices, supporting concentration and emotional balance.

Materials needed:

- Wooden boards (one per participant).
- Small nails.
- Hammers.
- Colourful threads or yarns.
- Pencils for marking points.
- Table covers (to protect surfaces and reduce noise).

➤➤ Small containers for nails.

➤➤ Scissors.

➤➤ Gloves (optional, for comfort and safety).

Estimated preparation time: 20–30 minutes (material layout, safety preparation, examples display).

Recommended group size: 10–20 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a spacious room with sturdy tables, good lighting, and a calm atmosphere. Background music could support the concentration.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): the facilitator welcomes participants and introduces the workshop's core principles: mindfulness, creativity, connection, and self-expression. Emphasise that every piece is unique.

Participants introduce themselves by sharing their name and one word describing their current emotion. The facilitator invites them to imagine a symbol, shape, or pattern that could represent that emotion.

Main steps of the activity:

15' – INTRODUCTION TO STRING ART AND SAFETY RULES

The facilitator explains the basics of string art and shows examples. Materials are introduced, and safety instructions for using hammers and nails are demonstrated clearly.

20' – PREPARING THE DESIGN

Participants choose a simple shape and lightly mark nail points on the board with a pencil.

20' – HAMMERING NAILS

Step-by-step guidance:

- Place the board flat on the table.
- Hold the nail near the top.
- Tap gently until the nail stands.
- Hammer deeper, leaving the head above the wood.
- Keep nails about one finger apart.
- If a nail bends, remove it and try again.
- Work slowly and without rushing.

40' – THREADING EMOTIONS

Participants begin threading yarn between nails:

- Start with one colour, add more if desired.
- Follow emotional intuition rather than fixed patterns.
- Use colour and tension to express mood and inner state.

20' – SHARING AND GROUP REFLECTION

Participants are invited to show their artworks and reflect:

- How did you feel while working?
- What does your piece represent for you?

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- What moment of the process felt most calming for you?
- How did working with your hands affect your emotions?
- What do the colours and patterns say about your inner state?
- Was it easy or difficult to slow down and focus?

Approaches used to create an environment that prioritises expression over skill:

- Emphasise process over outcome.
- Normalise slowness and imperfection.
- Encourage personal symbolism instead of aesthetic accuracy.
- Reinforce patience and presence.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: highlight how repetitive, tactile actions support grounding, patience, and emotional regulation. Encourage participants to see focused creative work as a healthy coping and self-care strategy.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described the process as calming, soothing, and deeply engaging. Many shared surprise at their ability to work confidently with tools and appreciated the meditative rhythm of hammering and threading. Participants often expressed pride and relief upon completing their artwork.

Participant quotes:

“Hammering the nails was surprisingly calming. It felt like releasing stress with every tap.”

“Focusing on rhythm, nails, and thread helped quiet my mind.”

“The process was soothing, and I felt proud of creating something meaningful with my hands.”



Acknowledgments

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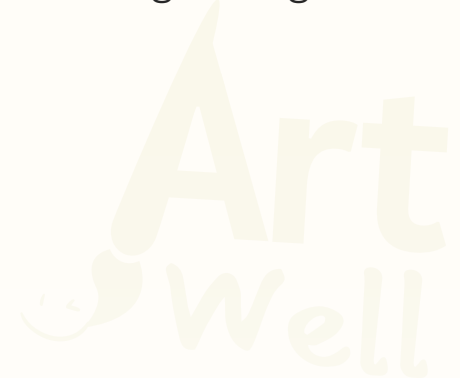
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