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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 Ukraine. 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

COLOURS OF EMOTIONS

Artistic methods applied: fluid art (abstract painting).

Well-being areas supported: emotional expression, emotional regulation, stress reduction, self-awareness, grounding.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

- Cathy Malchiodi emphasises that abstract and sensory-based art-making supports emotional regulation by bypassing verbal processing and engaging the nervous system directly (Handbook of Art Therapy).
- Van der Kolk highlights that creative, body-based activities help individuals process emotions stored somatically, especially when verbal expression is difficult (The Body Keeps the Score).
- Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow (1996) explains how immersive creative activities reduce stress and increase well-being by fully engaging attention in the present moment.
- Research in art therapy shows that intuitive painting can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, contributing to relaxation and reduced anxiety (Kaimal et al., 2016).

Materials needed:

- MDF art boards for fluid art (diameter 30 cm).
- Ready-to-use fluid art acrylic paints: white (largest quantity), blue, purple, black, yellow, green, red, brown, gold, silver, etc.
- Disposable black gloves (size S).
- Paper cups (approx. 150 pcs) – for paint and as supports.
- Brushes (small).
- Wooden sticks (coffee-stick type) for mixing paints.
- Spray varnish for sealing finished artworks.

➤➤ Straws.

➤➤ Protective table covers (plastic wrap or disposable tablecloths).

Estimated preparation time: 30-40 minutes (space setup and materials preparation).

Recommended group size: up to 10 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a well-ventilated space with large tables, easy-to-clean surfaces, and a calm atmosphere. The space should allow participants to move freely.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): introduce the activity as a process of emotional exploration through colour and movement rather than a painting session focused on artistic results. Emphasise that the process is more important than the final artwork. Invite participants to approach the activity with curiosity and self-compassion, letting colours represent emotions without the need to explain or justify them.

Main steps of the activity:

10' – EMOTIONAL CHECK-IN:

Ask participants to briefly reflect on how they are feeling in the moment. Encourage them to notice emotions without analysing them and to intuitively associate emotions with colours.

40–50' – FLUID ART CREATION:

Participants put on gloves and choose colours freely. Paint is poured onto the MDF surface and allowed to flow by tilting and rotating the board.

Suggested techniques for expression:

- Using straws to blow paint and create organic patterns.
- Using wooden sticks or brushes to guide or draw into the paint.
- Layering colours to reflect emotional complexity.

Participants are encouraged to follow sensations and emotions rather than visual control.

10' – FINISHING AND CONTAINMENT

When participants feel their artwork is complete, it is placed aside to dry. Once dry, the facilitator applies spray varnish to seal the artwork. This step is explained as a symbolic act of “containing” and protecting emotions that were expressed.

10' – GROUNDING AND CLOSURE

Invite participants to step back, observe their work quietly, and take a few grounding breaths. The facilitator acknowledges the emotional work done and smoothly transitions the group toward reflection.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- How did you feel before starting the painting, and how do you feel now?
- What part of the process felt most calming or meaningful for you?
- Did any emotions appear that you did not expect?
- How did it feel to express emotions without words?

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

- Reinforce that abstract expression does not require technical ability.
- Avoid aesthetic judgments and instead use neutral, descriptive language.
- Encourage participants to follow intuition and bodily sensations rather than planned ideas.
- Normalise letting go of control and embracing unpredictability.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: highlight how non-verbal expression can support emotional regulation and stress relief. Encourage participants to recognise painting as a grounding practice that can be used whenever emotions feel overwhelming or difficult to express verbally.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described the painting process as deeply calming and emotionally releasing. Many reported feelings of harmony, inner balance, and emotional clarity.

Participant quotes:

“I learned how to easily express my emotions through painting when I can't express them in words.”

“The most helpful moment was when I started painting – I expressed my emotions on the canvas and felt incredible harmony.”

“The painting process itself is very calming.”

2 ACTIVITY

FROM FEELING TO SHAPE

Artistic methods applied: plasticine painting.

Well-being areas supported: emotional expression, emotional regulation, stress reduction, somatic grounding, increased self-awareness, sensory regulation, symbolic processing.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Art-making processes that involve tactile materials like clay and plasticine are widely used in therapeutic and psychological support contexts because they engage sensory, motor, and emotional systems simultaneously, helping to externalise internal experience and regulate affect. Research shows that engaging with modelling materials can:

- Activate non-verbal emotional expression and reduce emotional overload, allowing feelings that are difficult to articulate to emerge in sensory and symbolic form.
- Support emotional regulation through tactile engagement. Squeezing, shaping, and manipulating materials can reduce stress and provide grounding.
- Facilitate immersion in the present moment and reduce anxiety, consistent with broader evidence on art-making and stress relief.
- Lead to reductions in negative emotions, as well as increases in self-expression and overall mood.

Materials needed:

- Plasticine blocks in assorted colours.
- Rectangular MDF boards.
- Plasticine modelling tools (stecks).
- Simple pencils (for initial pre-drawing).

Estimated preparation time: 15–25 minutes (organising workstations and laying out materials).

Recommended group size: up to 10 participants.

What kind of space or environment works best: a calm, clutter-free room with tables covered for easy cleaning and space for participants to work. Natural light and if possible soft background music help create a relaxed atmosphere.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): begin by explaining that this is a sensory-based expression activity, focused on translating inner experience into shape, colour, and texture. Emphasise that the process is the goal, not the artistic outcome. Invite participants to notice bodily sensations, breath, and emotional reactions as they work with plasticine.

Main steps of the activity:

5–15' – EMOTIONAL CHECK-IN AND SKETCH:

Invite participants to close their eyes for a moment, notice their current emotional state, and choose a starting colour that resonates with that feeling. They can make a light pencil sketch on the MDF board to outline an idea or shape they feel drawn to represent their state (e.g., swirling lines for chaotic feelings, blocks for pressure, open spaces for calm).

30–50' – PLASTICINE SHAPING AND PAINTING:

Participants use plasticine to fill, build up and sculpt on their board. Encourage a variety of techniques:

- Flatten plasticine to create colourful backgrounds.
- Build texture and low relief by layering pieces.

- Use sticks to draw lines, marks, or tactile patterns.

Throughout, remind participants that this is not about realism or technical skill, but about sensory exploration and emotional translation, encouraging them to let shapes emerge intuitively in response to their emotions.

5–10' – SENSORY INTEGRATION AND SLOWING DOWN:

As participants finish, invite them to pause, place their hands gently on the artwork, and take a deep breath. Naming the piece (even silently) can help in connecting internal experience with what has been made.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- What was the first colour or shape you chose, and why did it feel natural?
- How did working with your hands and the plasticine influence your feelings?
- Did any emotion emerge that you didn't anticipate?
- What does your work express about your inner state right now?
- How could you use this creative expression when you feel stressed or overwhelmed?

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

- Use process-oriented language (“What does this texture feel like?”, “What colour emerges when you think of calm?”).
- Avoid evaluative or aesthetic comments (“good”, “beautiful”).

➤➤ Acknowledge effort and emotional engagement rather than outcomes.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: guide participants to notice links between physical engagement and emotional shifts. For example, how squeezing and shaping plasticine may have lessened physical tension or helped make abstract feelings more tangible. Highlight that this kind of creative, embodied practice can be used as a grounding tool outside the session.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants shared that they enjoyed working with plasticine and found the process pleasant and engaging. Several participants described the experience as relaxing and appreciated the opportunity to shape plasticine and draw freely. Some participants mentioned that the activity felt useful overall and that the process itself was meaningful for them. Others noted that working with plasticine helped them stay focused on the task and enjoy the moment.

Participant quotes:

“Working with plasticine helped develop concentration.”

“Knowing that others were there to help removed pressure and fear of failure.”

“The process itself was relaxing and enjoyable.”

“The activity felt fully useful and supportive as a whole.”

3 ACTIVITY

THE SECRET MAP
OF INNER WORLDS

Artistic methods applied: drawing, symbolic storytelling, guided imagination (fairytale therapy).

Well-being areas supported: self-awareness, identity exploration, meaning-making, emotional reflection, connection with personal resources and challenges.

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Fairytale therapy and narrative-based approaches are grounded in psychological theories that emphasise storytelling as a tool for meaning-making, identity construction, and emotional processing.

- Bruno Bettelheim (1976) described fairytales as symbolic containers for internal conflicts and developmental challenges, helping individuals explore fears, hopes, and values (The Uses of Enchantment).
- Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) highlights how symbolic stories allow people to externalise inner experiences and reflect on them from a safe distance.
- Jungian psychology emphasises symbolic imagery (maps, kingdoms, directions) as representations of inner psychic landscapes, supporting integration and self-understanding.
- In expressive arts therapy, creating personal symbolic worlds helps individuals access internal resources and reflect on life paths without direct confrontation.

Materials needed:

- A4 paper.
- Colour pencils (minimum 12 different colours per group).

Estimated preparation time: 10–15 minutes.

Recommended group size: up to 20 participants. One larger group divided into smaller groups of 4 participants (pair work included).

What kind of space or environment works best: a calm space with tables, allowing both individual drawing and small-group discussion. A quiet, imaginative atmosphere supports immersion in the fairytale metaphor.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): introduce the activity as the beginning of a fairytale journey that will continue in the following activity. Explain that participants will create a symbolic inner world that represents their current emotional and life landscape. Emphasise imagination, symbolism, and personal meaning.

Main steps of the activity:

15' – CREATING THE INNER KINGDOM MAP:

Participants draw a symbolic map of their personal kingdom. They are invited to place different elements according to the following directions:

- East – the sunrise of new possibilities.
- West – places of past experience.
- South – warmth, support, and safety.
- North – challenges, obstacles, and growth.

Participants name their locations freely (e.g. “Forest of doubt”, “Lake of calm”, “Mountain of courage”).

10' – PRESENTATION AND SELECTIVE SHARING:

Each participant briefly presents themselves and one location that feels most important to them at the moment.

20' – PAIR WORK: CHOOSING A JOURNEY:

Participants form pairs and imagine travelling through their kingdoms together:

- Where does the journey begin?
- Where do they want to arrive?
- What creatures, symbols, events, or helpers appear along the way?

This stage introduces movement and transition, preparing the narrative for the next fairytale activity.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- Which place on your map feels most alive for you right now?
- Was it easier to talk about yourself through symbols rather than directly?
- What surprised you in your map or your partner's journey?
- Which direction (north, south, east, west) feels most present in your life?
- What would help you move safely through your inner kingdom?

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

- Reinforce that maps are symbolic.
- Encourage naming and storytelling rather than detailed drawing.
- Use curiosity-based prompts (“What does this place represent for you?”).
- Normalise abstract shapes and simple lines.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: highlight that symbolic mapping allows people to observe their inner state with distance and compassion. Emphasise that recognising resources (supportive places) and challenges (northern territories) is a form of self-care and emotional awareness.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants described the activity as meaningful and useful. Drawing the map of their own kingdom was often mentioned as a key moment that helped them reflect and generate new ideas. Some participants shared that the process felt logical and well-structured, which made it easier to follow and engage with the activity as a whole.

Participant quotes:

"Drawing the map of one's own kingdom was the most useful moment of the activity."

"Creating the map helped generate new ideas."

"Everything in the activity felt useful."

A C T I V I T Y

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SPEAKING THROUGH
FAIRYTALE

Artistic methods applied: plasticine modelling, creative writing, symbolic storytelling (fairytale therapy).

Well-being areas supported: inner dialogue, emotional expression, accessing internal resources, self-support, integration of strengths, self-compassion

Scientific evidence linking the art practice to mental health benefits:

Fairytale therapy and symbolic dialogue are grounded in narrative and expressive approaches that support emotional processing and self-reflection through metaphor.

- Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) emphasises externalising inner experiences and allowing them to “speak” through symbolic characters, helping individuals gain distance and insight.
- Jungian psychology highlights archetypal figures (such as guardians, helpers, messengers) as representations of inner strengths, boundaries, and protective functions.
- Expressive arts therapy uses symbolic creation and writing to facilitate inner dialogue and integration of emotional resources (Malchiodi, 2012).
- Writing messages from symbolic figures supports self-compassion and emotional regulation by activating reflective rather than reactive processing.

Materials needed:

- Soft plasticine (minimum 12 colours per group).
- A4 paper.
- Pens.

Estimated preparation time: 10–15 minutes.

Recommended group size: the same groups as in the previous activity (small groups of 4 participants).

What kind of space or environment works best: a calm, quiet space that supports concentration, imagination, and reflective writing. Tables are needed for both modelling and writing.

How should the facilitator introduce the activity (what to say, how to set the tone): explain that this activity continues the journey through the inner kingdom created earlier. Emphasise that participants will now give voice, protection, and messages to their inner world. Encourage intuitive work and remind participants not to overthink or analyse.

Main steps of the activity:

15' – CREATING THE GUARDIAN OF THE KINGDOM:

Participants are invited to create a guardian of their kingdom using soft plasticine. After modelling, participants briefly present their guardian by sharing:

- The name of the guardian.
- Its qualities (e.g. strength, care, wisdom, courage).

15' – WRITING A MESSAGE FROM THE KINGDOM:

Participants take an A4 paper and a pen and write a short letter from a resident of their kingdom to themselves.

Instructions:

- The message should be written in the first person (“I”).

- It must be signed (who is sending the message?)
- The tone can be supportive, warning, encouraging, or reflective.

This step supports inner dialogue and self-reflection through symbolic distance.

15' – “GIFT FROM MY KINGDOM”:

Participants create a small symbolic gift from their kingdom - an object that represents warmth, support, or an inner resource. They are invited (optionally) to briefly explain what the gift symbolises.

10' – RETURNING FROM THE FAIRYTALE:

After the symbolic gift is created, invite participants to place the guardian, the letter, and the gift together in front of them. Invite participants to silently notice what it feels like to have protection (guardian), guidance (message), and support (gift) present at the same time. Ask them to imagine taking these elements back with them from the fairytale world into everyday life.

Offer a gentle transition back to the group space (e.g. deep breath together, stretching hands), clearly marking the end of the fairytale journey.

Reflection and debrief questions to be asked after the activity:

- What qualities does your guardian protect in you?
- Was there something in the letter that surprised you?
- What does the gift from your kingdom represent in your life right now?
- How can you stay connected to your inner kingdom after this session?

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

- Remind participants that guardians and gifts are symbolic, not realistic.
- Encourage intuitive shaping and simple forms.
- Normalise silence and personal pacing during writing.

Approaches for guiding participants to reflect on personal well-being through art: highlight that symbolic figures and messages often represent inner resources, needs, or boundaries. Emphasise that participants can return to these symbols mentally when they need support, protection, or guidance in real life.

Insights from participant feedback and reflections: participants shared that they enjoyed working with plasticine and drawing as part of the activity. Several participants described the experience as engaging and pleasant, highlighting the creative process itself. Many noted that moments of interaction, care, and mutual help within the group were particularly meaningful.

Participant quotes:

"Working with plasticine and drawing was enjoyable."

"Moments of care, mutual help, and communication were the most useful part of the activity."

"Group support was experienced as helpful."



Acknowledgments

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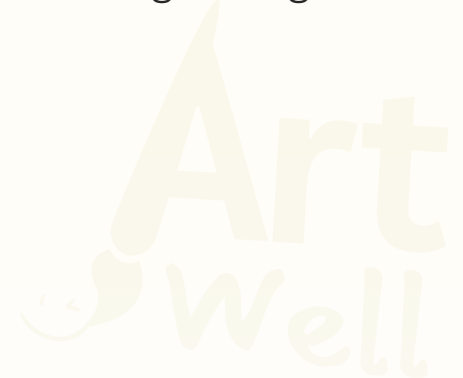
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