ARTS AND HUMANITIES MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH SHOWCASE

Institute of Mental Health Research at York & Humanities Research Centre

Our research at the interface of the arts and humanities and mental health is rich and varied.

When we consider mental health challenges through an arts and humanities lens it provides a refreshing and invigorating perspective.

A new interdisciplinary approach helps us find unexpected answers to the enormity of challenges that mental health research in the context of the fast paced 21st century presents.

The arts and humanities not only provoke us to explore what we can learn from the past about how we tackle the mental health problems of the future but engagement with the creative arts and heritage can in itself be a route to better mental health and wellbeing.

Event Summary

On the **21st** of **June 2023**, researchers came together in the Bowland Auditorium to share ideas and generate new collaborations.
The showcasing event was expertly hosted by *Lina Gega (Director of the Institute for Mental Health Research at York - IMRY)* and *Jonathan Finch (Deputy Director of the Humanities Research Centre - HRC)*.
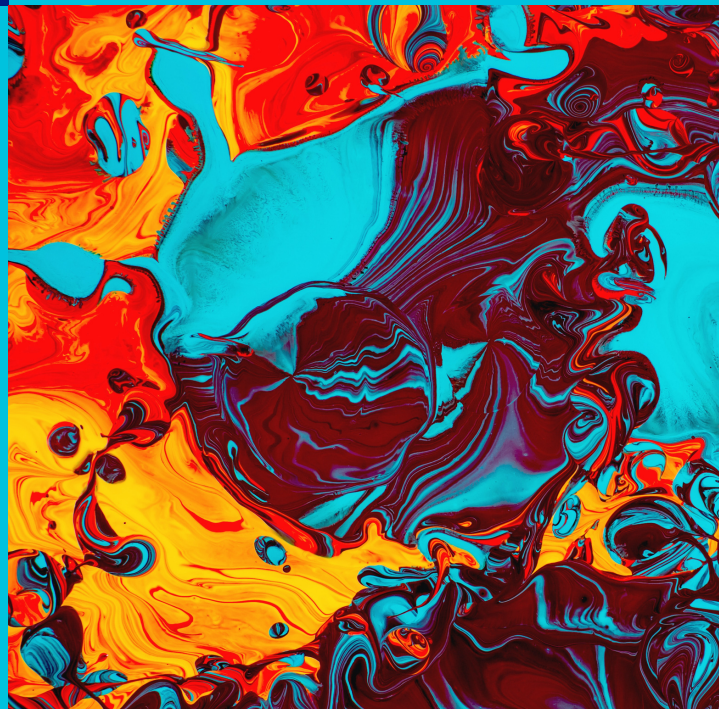
Art engagement

Intuitively, we know time spent appreciating works of art can support mental health and wellbeing. Expression through art also provides an outlet to improve your own mental health and is the basis of art therapy. An introduction to the University of York's fabulous art collection, including the **sculpture trail**, from the first ever *University of York art curator* **Helena Cox** was a great way to start the showcase event. The collection provides a treasure trove of opportunity for mental health themed creative engagement with the wider public and student body. Watch this space.

Creative expression

Creative expression through art in the context of mental health was exemplified in a thoughtful presentation by *Clara Cheung (History of Art).* Clara's project explored the role of painting in processing traumatic memories of decolonisation for activists in Hong Kong.
The mediative art-making process being shown to be essential for participants to connect to sense and collective memories of the protests and confrontations.

The formation of the Hongkonger identity amid the body-based activist movement provided a modern example of how identity and a sense of self can be expressed creatively to support mental wellbeing.

Chloe Wigston Smith (English & Related Literature) was then able to show how women working in the eighteenth century were doing the same through needlework and handicrafts. Historical examples show makers using their needles not just to examine and express their identity but to also process experiences of trauma, isolation and imprisonment. Lending support to how craft might be used today in a therapeutic context.

Heritage & nature

Investigating the connections between heritage crafting in the outdoors and mental well-being is something that *Steph Piper (Archaeology)* is doing in **Craftwell** an interdisciplinary project between Archaeology and Health Sciences.

The York Experimental Archaeology Research (YEAR) Centre is providing a perfect spot to understand how experiencing outdoor heritage crafting activities might benefit young people's wellbeing. During workshops students focus on crafts with tangible links to the past.

*University of York Art Collection - Sculpture Trail
Artist: Mowbray, Joanna   Date: 1995
Title: Beyond and Within   Medium: hot rolled steel*

Photo credit: Shields, Paul

# Using digital arts to practically support mental wellbeing

For many, the digital world is perceived as a fast paced and challenging place to live. Often the focus is on how technology erodes mental health and wellbeing. But research at York showcases the array of diverse and practical applications digital arts can have on improving mental health.

Participatory film making reminds us how powerful films are in communicating with audiences that are difficult to reach to provide support, empathy and a sense of connection. Two elegant examples were shared.

The first participatory film from *Philip Kerrigan (Health Sciences)* and *Simona Manni (School of Arts & Creative Technologies)* '**Unlocking Nature**' sensitively communicated the mental benefits of engaging with natural spaces. The second was an participatory interactive film by *Simona Manni* representing the multiple perspectives on mental health recovery entitled '**Stepping Through Interactive**'. Both films were coproduced with people with lived experience of mental ill-health.

Coproduction and creative engagement with end-users - *people with lived experience -* was an important theme throughout the day.

The **CoMusicate** project seeks to co-design novel technology with adults with lived experience of severe mental ill-health that supports musical and social interaction. *Caroline Waddington-Jones (School of Arts & Creative Technologies)* reflected on the challenges and intricacies of the co-design process for this project. Group music-making is a powerful means of strengthening social connectedness and offers opportunities for self-expression, and can positively impact the self-esteem, anxiety, and quality of life of adults with severe mental illness.
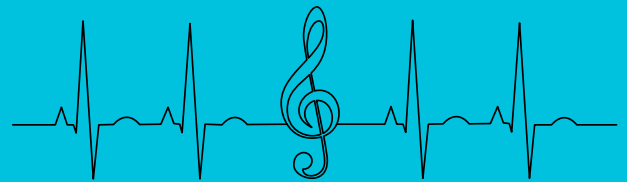
Singing is also widely reported as being good for health and wellbeing, especially singing as part of a choir *Helena Daffern (School of Physics, Engineering & Technology)* described her work in the **AudioLab** to create a number of different technological frameworks for Virtual Choirs. Again Helena emphasized the importance of co-design particularly as part of the virtual models currently being developed with partners **Care Reality** and **Alzheimer Scotland** to create an experience suitable for delivery within Care Homes.
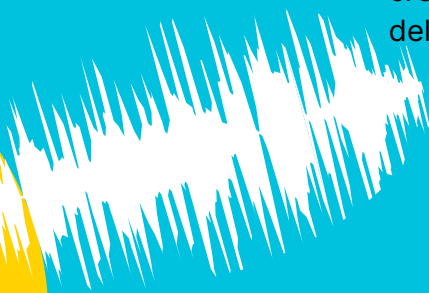
Cristobal Catalan *(School of Arts & Creative Technologies)* is focused on improving mental health through the process of playing. In his PhD he will use game design to create a therapeutic intervention in the form of an exploration computer game. By using interactive storytelling techniques the game is designed to have a positive impact on a player's mental state.

Working with mental health professionals and target users Cristobal plans to develop a framework to support the design of prototypes that still capture the user engagement associated with everyday gaming.

Creative digital technology is also being applied to support another mental health project in young people called **ComBAT** (Community-based Behavioural Activation Training). The project will develop, implement and evaluate Behavioural Activation (BA), a brief psychological therapy, for young people with mild to moderate depression.

A challenge identified by ComBAT is how to motivate young people who complete the therapy to continue the activities which alleviate depression after the therapy ended. This is the challenge undertaken in **ComBAT Digital**. **Marian Ursu** *(School of Arts & Creative Technologies)* explained how the team are developing an App to redirect user's accountability from therapists to themselves and maintain the motivation to carry out prescribed activities.

Better understanding

It isn't always about providing new solutions but sometimes a different disciplinary lens provides an alternative way to view existing ways of working to improve them.

There were some excellent examples of this throughout the showcase with regard to the role of language. **Jen Brown** *(Health Sciences)* explained how her research intervention to improve diabetes self-management and outcomes in people with severe mental illness (SMI) is now being translated into Urdu. The team are hoping to use translation and cultural adaptation to improve research participation for non-English speakers helping to tackle health inequalities that are particularly pronounced for individuals from South Asian communities.

Paul Drew *(Language & Linguistic Science)* explained how by using conversational analysis of the interactions between patients and practitioners in telephone-mediated therapy sessions for depression and anxiety the team has been able to provide great insights into how this routine NHS service can be improved. The research is part of a 5 year National Institute for Health and Care Research funded project 'Enhancing the quality of psychological interventions delivered by telephone' (EQUITy).
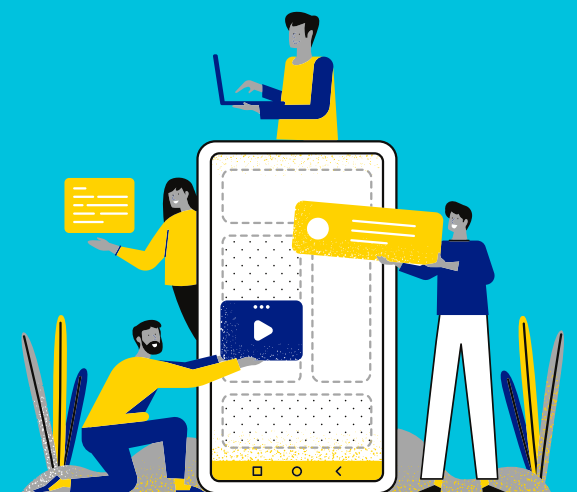
Sometimes the simple use of metaphors can help us understand and explain the hidden side of depression. *Angelos Sofocleous (Philosophy)* developed the metaphor of being a spectator in his PhD research. The metaphor refers to the common experience in depression of feeling as if you are spectating the world without being able to participate with others, so disrupting interpersonal relationships.

Francesca Lewis (Centre for Women's Studies; Sociology; English & Related Studies) provided a new way of understanding borderline personality disorder. In her PhD, Francesca developed a methodology called autø/gnøsis. By approaching borderline from an alternative perspective she recasts the borderline not as a patient to be diagnosed but as a diagnostician.

The power of a narrative to promote knowledge, increase empathy, and reduce bias was again brought to the fore by *Jenny Threlfall (Social Work, School for Business and Society)*. Instead of relying on a traditional training approach Jenny described how she has been involved in development a pilot intervention to promote anti-racist social work practice. Novels/films/TV created by minority ethnic artists was used as the basis for monthly discussion groups helping participants explore the intersection of race and mental health and reflect on how to change their practice. It is essential to provide practitioners with a better understanding of the experience of minority ethnic communities who have poorer mental health outcomes when compared to white service users and may encounter discrimination when accessing services.

Lessons from the past

York was the cradle of modern mental health care, with pioneering approaches at The Retreat reflected in the development of care in the wider system. **The Borthwick Institute for Archives** at the University holds an internationally-significant collection of archives related to health in York - with a particular focus on records from the many mental health care bodies and institutions in the city and surrounding locations. *Gary Brannan (Keeper of Archives & Special Collections)* explained how these archives are a unique research resource, with almost limitless possibilities for new investigations into how we cared for those with acute mental illnesses in the recent past.

Helen Metcalfe (History) provided an example of how historical correspondence can be used to challenge current societal perspectives on mental health. Helen's work explores grief through the lens of eighteenth-century understandings of this emotion. She hopes that it will encourage wider debate about how we might better understand the nuances of grief today.

New perspectives

However, as **JT Welsch** *(English & Related Literature)* discussed it is not always clear that historic events influence modern perceptions about mental health in a helpful way. His research looking more closely at how the 'Werther effect' continues to dominate societal debate about suicidal contagion showing the power of literary examples.

Through research we can continue to re-question past assumptions to ensure current responses to mental health problems are still fit for purpose in light of new information. **Tom Stoneham & Robert Davies** *(Philosophy)* make a compelling case against the use of narrative in trauma care, challenging the assumption that reliving details of past traumatic experiences should be a default part of trauma care. Highlighting that in fact this practice is not plausibly ethical, made on a theoretically sound basis and the approach is epistemically unjust warranting a substantial refocus of trauma care.

New solutions

Fresh perspectives and collaboration can provide new solutions to support better mental health outcomes. **Liz Haddon** *(School of Arts & Creative Technologies)* is working locally with colleagues across departments to collate research data to investigate whether the Humanities Research Centre's artistic/wellbeing activities for staff and students might develop participants' and practitioner/facilitators' understanding of mental health needs and support. This work will have implications for the high education sector as it seeks to improve the mental health of university communities.

More broadly, **Martin Webber & Beth Casey** *(School of Business & Society)* are working with **Ripon Museums** to develop ways to support people with mental health problems to engage with volunteering opportunities. There is growing evidence of the wellbeing gains from volunteering in heritage settings but sometimes organisations lack the capacity, expertise or resources to provide additional support which thereby restricts volunteering opportunities to those more able to volunteer independently. The practice guide to supported volunteering will be an essential resource. In the future, perhaps we will also see it being used to extend the reach of the University of York.

Thank you to all the researchers who took part in the event and shared their research expertise with us all. Demonstrating the strength and potential for more interdisciplinary mental health research at York.
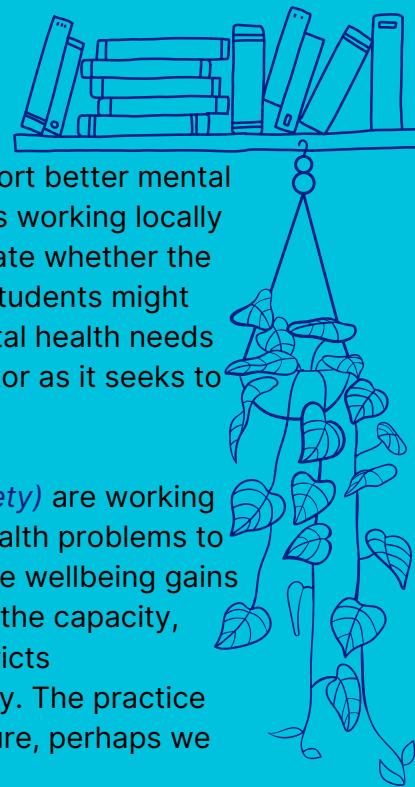
Contact us

To find out more about mental health research at the University of York please get in touch with the team at the Institute of Mental Health Research.
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