

Regional Spotlight: Arts Extension at University of Kentucky makes its MARK with arts-in-health curriculum, Mind.Art.Recovery.KY.

Managing one's personal health and wellness was difficult enough for the average person in 2021. But for those struggling with Substance Use Disorder (SUD), challenges to well-being were even more pronounced, and the stakes much higher. A pandemic, coupled with a worsening epidemic of opioid and substance misuse has challenged communities to meet the health needs of its people in new and creative ways.

Rising to this challenge, Cooperative Extension at University of Kentucky (UK) with its broad reach statewide and with funding from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), has found success in integrating the arts into existing SUD recovery and prevention efforts for increased holistic wellness benefits in the state. These results add to growing evidence that, for some, creativity could be key in unlocking a path to recovery.

Through a partnership between Arts Extension, Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK), Family and Consumer Sciences Extension (FCS) and 4-H Youth Development, a new six-unit curriculum of arts-in-health classes was envisioned and implemented.

Utilizing existing arts engagement methods and arts-in-health best practices, Mind.Art.Recovery.KY, helps establish the role of expressive arts in SUD interventions through journal making, creative writing, painting, printmaking and mixed media. The choice to use art-journaling as the format for engagement harmonized with an already-present emphasis on journaling in recovery programs, and allowed for the introduction of a variety of art concepts, mediums and techniques. Participants in the pilot program learned new art skills and mindfulness techniques to enhance thoughtfulness, resiliency and emotive expression in constructive ways.

In 2021, MARK was piloted in 4 Kentucky counties to 61 individuals at existing rehabilitation and at-risk facilities. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive with many reporting newly acquired confidence to express themselves through art and that they looked forward to continue using the art methods presented, both for themselves as a coping strategy, and to help them reconnect with their children and families. One participant shared that she was excited to show her family her journal, because she viewed it as a way to explain and help others understand what she was feeling during her recovery journey. Nearly all (93%) of adult participants believe they acquired skills in visual and literary art, and 86% reported that their participation in MARK improved their overall health and well-being.

Partnering extension agents reported interactions with new clientele and groups not previously engaged, confidence in delivering new artistic programming, and an increased understanding of how the arts can contribute to wellness in individuals recovering from SUD.

These early results indicate that an expressive arts-in-health curriculum can provide substantial benefit for many in recovery and equip communities with an accessible platform for wellness engagement. The next phase of this program will train Extension Agents, recovery center staff and community health coalitions across Kentucky to implement this program in their own communities. Peer review of the final curriculum is scheduled for summer 2022 with anticipated distribution in the fall. For additional information about how your community can make its own MARK, contact Jessica Evans, Arts Extension Associate, CEDIK, at Jessica.evans@uky.edu.