

Research Summary: Community arts, identity and living well with serious mental illness

By Louisa Peters

Background

Despite international recognition that creative and cultural activities positively impact health and well-being¹, they are rarely utilised within Western medicine² due to the medicalisation of mental health³. By pathologizing mental illness, recovery is considered the domain of clinical care only³, isolating individuals within a society in which they are more likely to experience inequalities that cause further barriers to recovery⁴. Community organisations are filling a gap left by healthcare services and health inequalities, including access to cultural resources such as the arts⁵. The aim of this research was not to find out what works, but to explain how, why and in what context community arts activities enable recovery processes from serious mental illness, particularly the profound experience of identity change.

Method: Realist evaluation

Data Analysed:

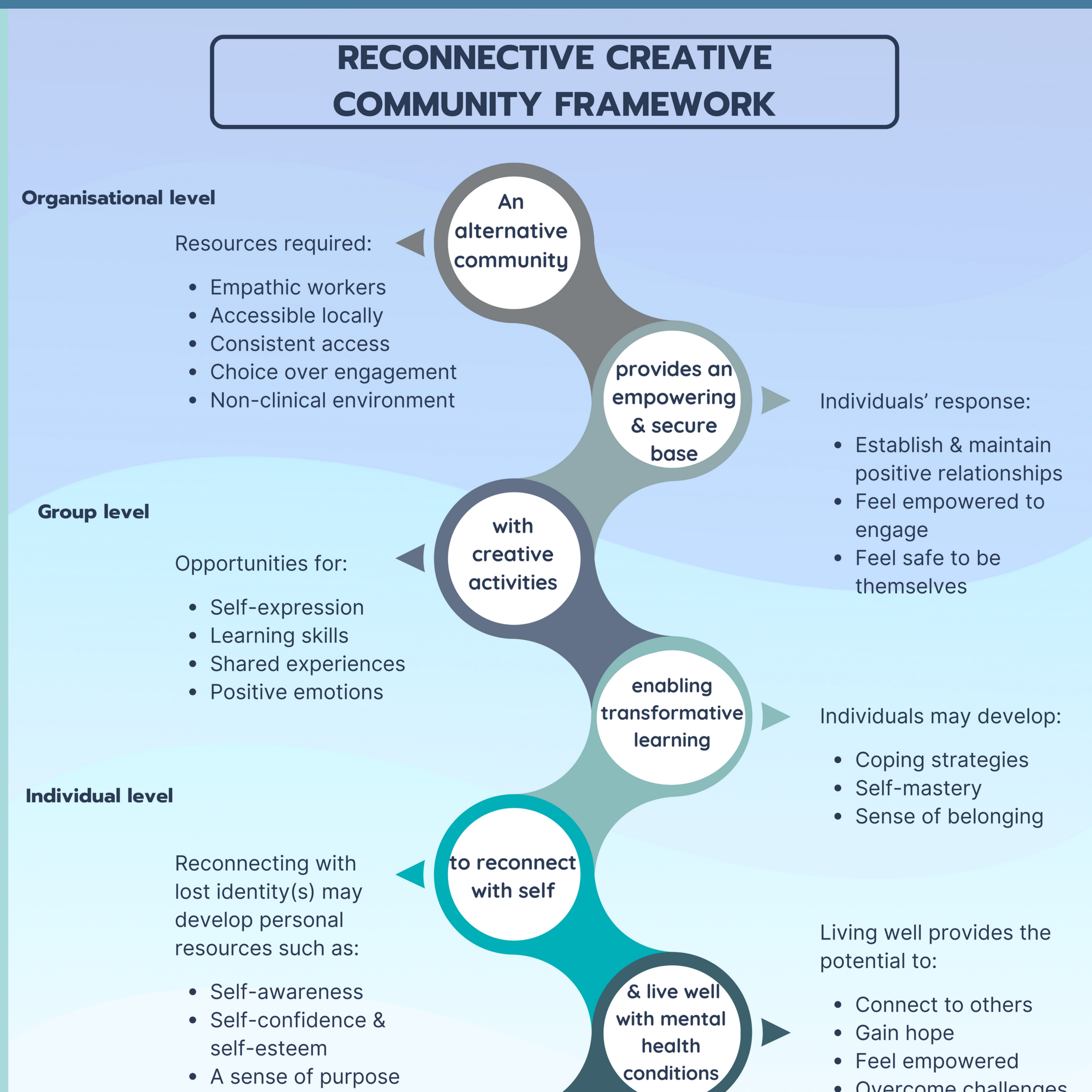
22 articles & reports⁶
10 poems
8 pre-/post-
ReQoL questionnaires

26 interviews
7 short films
16 visual arts pieces
Input from 12 expert panel members



Findings:

This evidence-informed framework explains how & why community-based creative activities engages recovery processes and helps people to live well with mental health conditions. Explore the three accompanying posters to see more findings, including participant artworks and quotes.



There is a need for **safe spaces in the community** when facing challenges due to mental illness and inequalities, including:

Ongoing symptom severity



There is something going on in my head nearly 24/7... I got diagnosed with PTSD. When I have nightmares, takes me straight back...



Fineliner Mandala

Masks Men Wear

Why aren't men allowed to cry
Behind masks they have to lie

By the unspoken emotions they are held down
In angst and frustration they are held down

I want to ask for a little help from my friends
I don't know how to ask or how to make amends

Behind my long sleeves my injuries I conceal
I cannot admit o people that this numb pain is real

My happiness was too easy for angry world to steal
I cannot show the world my inward rage
I feel the need to lock it up in my emotional cage

It's either pain or blankness, they never rest
I refuse to end it now, nor at the moment do
I want to go to the place that's the best

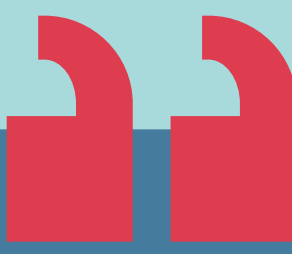
I don't know why men feel they should not cry
Over generations our pains we were forced to deny

From this current situation I want to be free
Getting tired of being up and down and all the negativity around me

I wish the pain around me would just be gone
As a guy I should not be embarrassed to have someone to lean on
Just because we become weak doesn't mean we are any less strong

Poem

Intersectional stigma

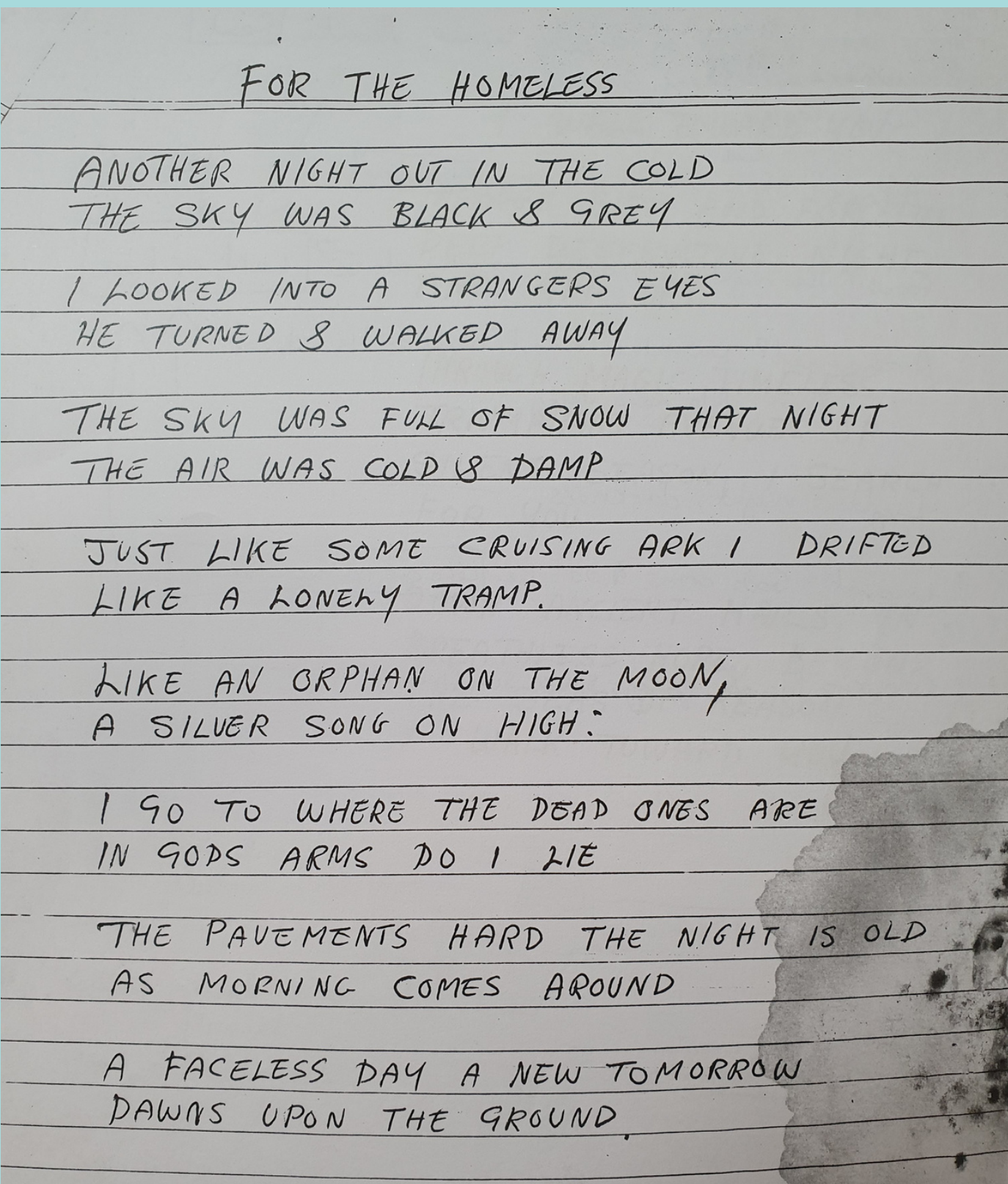


...got to be the masculine type... talking about [mental health] you're being weak...
A lot of people still think of depression as just another word for lazyitis.

Financial hardship



Writing about the homeless... it gives you an example of where I thought I'd end up because I was so bad with my nerves and my drinking

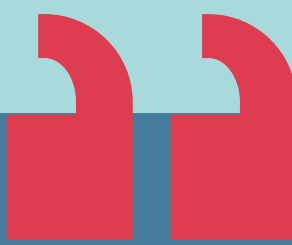


Handwritten poem



Mixed media collage

Fear and isolation



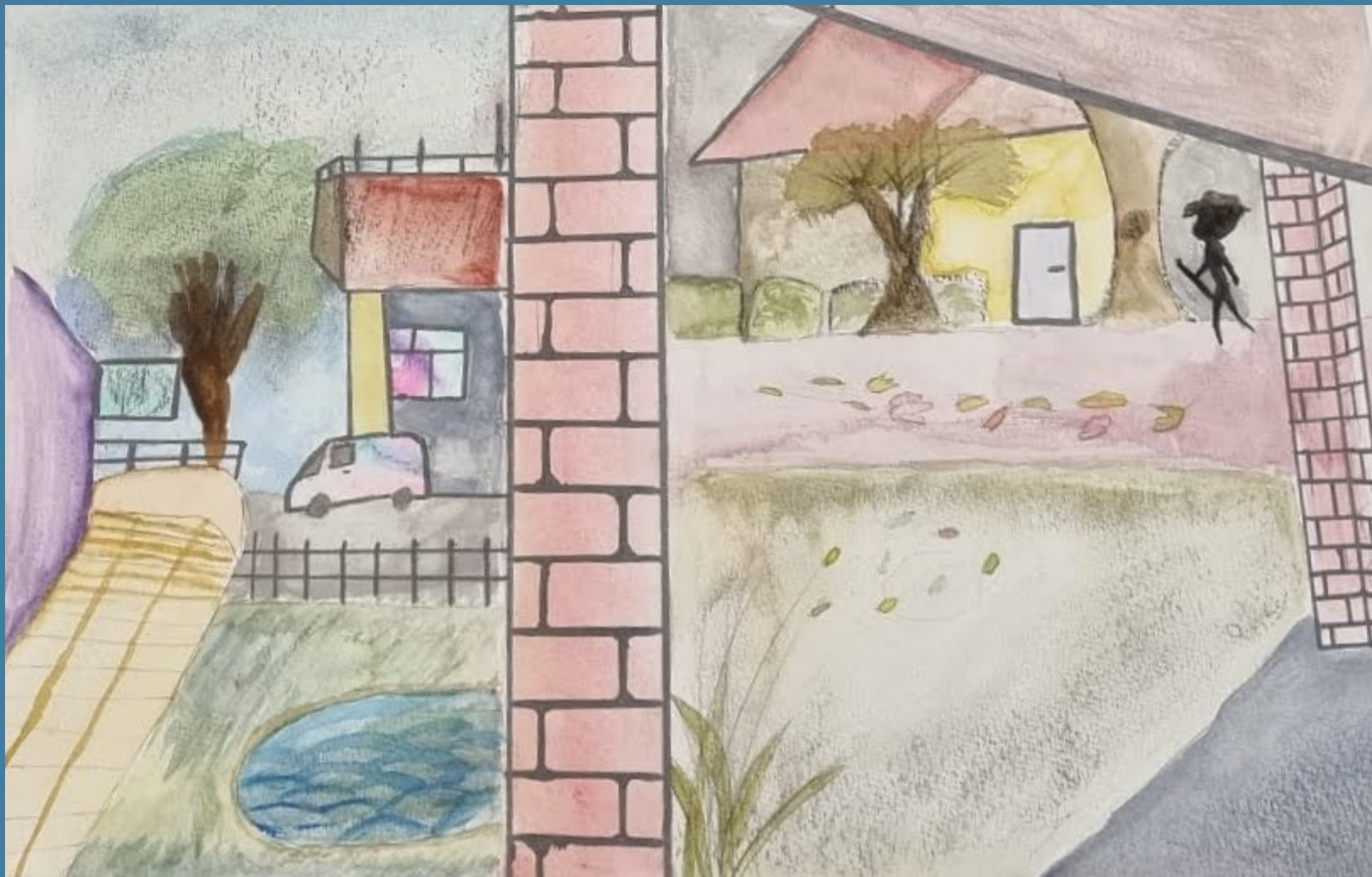
I don't want to [interact] with random strangers... I've had too much trauma to be [interacting] with unsafe people

Creative activities **reconnect**
to lost parts of **identity**
by providing opportunities for:

Learning to cope



It takes me away
from that feeling...
I can go to this place,
and I can go and
do my art, and I can go
& be my own person.



Mixed media drawing

Positive Emotions



I like these colours, variation
of stitches and just pleasing
shapes... Colours, shapes,
patterns, keeps me happy

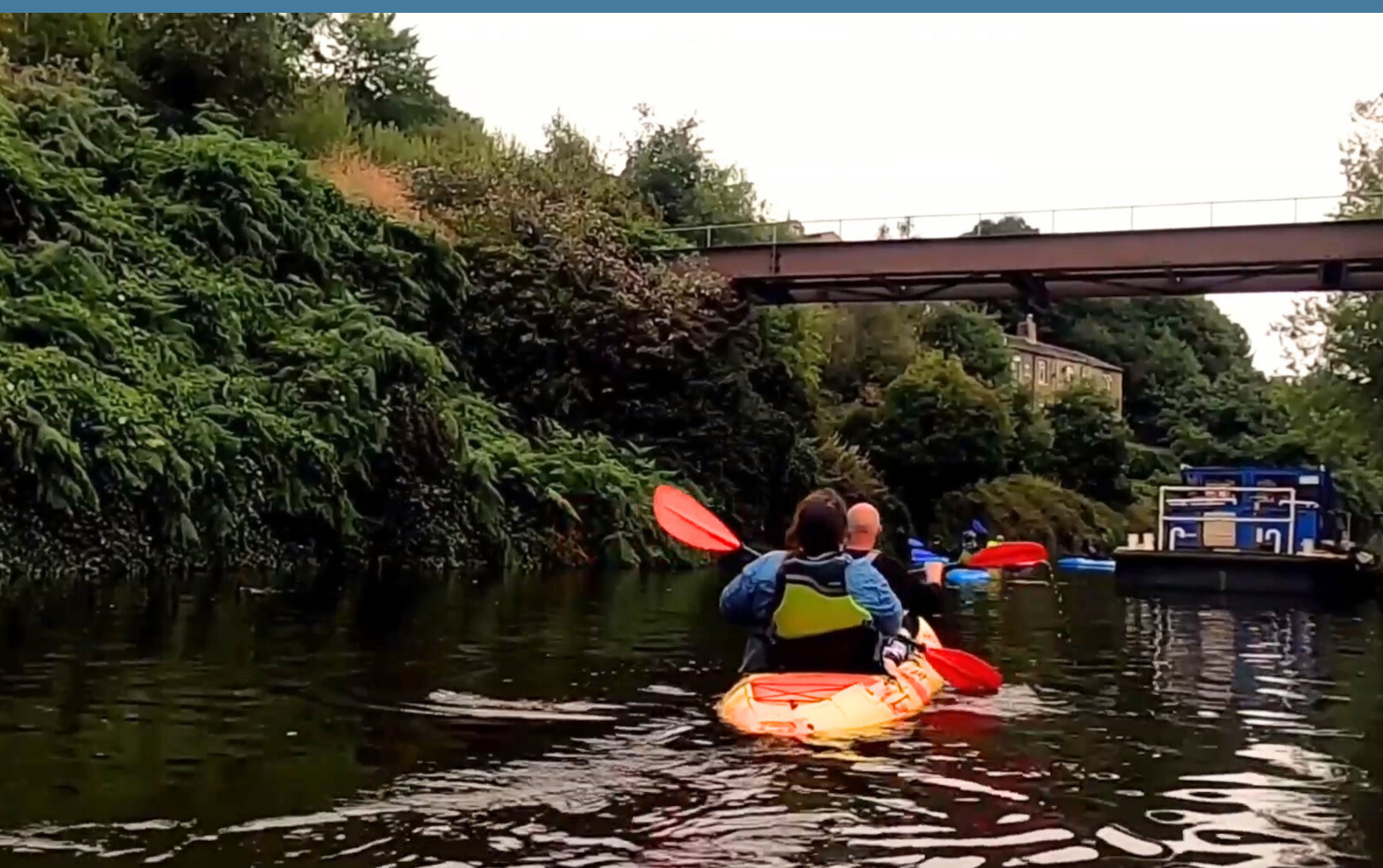


Freehand embroidery

Connect to others



I enjoy just
being me now...
I feel like I belong...
We're a good bunch of
guys and I would be
there for them



Still image from short film

Overcoming challenges



I'm not letting anything
get on top of me.
I'm feeling extremely
confident... [My art group]
actually raised my
self-esteem. Without it, I
would have been nowhere.



Acrylic painting of Kate Bush

Living well with mental illness means
“keeping level”.
Everything else is “icing on the cake”

Keeping level



...the aim is not to lose.
I know I'm not going to
recover-recover, but
as long as I'm not
letting it beat me...
keeping yourself level

My Own White Knight

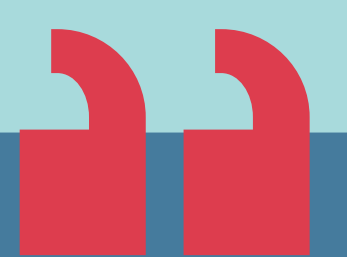
I don't want to come down again
It would be worse, that pain
I don't want to feel that way,
all the things feeling the same
Putting the guard up,
putting the evil down the drain

I am my own white knight
avoiding the temptation
of saying good night
Leaning for myself
to keep up my personal fight

I don't have to live for you
as long as I live for me
It only took me all these years
for my eyes to see

Poem

Self-confidence



Really gets [me]
back in touch with my
creativity... I lost all
confidence in that after
having my diagnosis...
So, you know, it's
really helped me



Still image from short film

Managing mental health

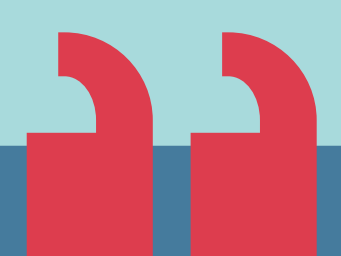


I've got to go to the
art room... That was a
good thing, because
it just made me give that
bit of time for myself,
which I didn't do before

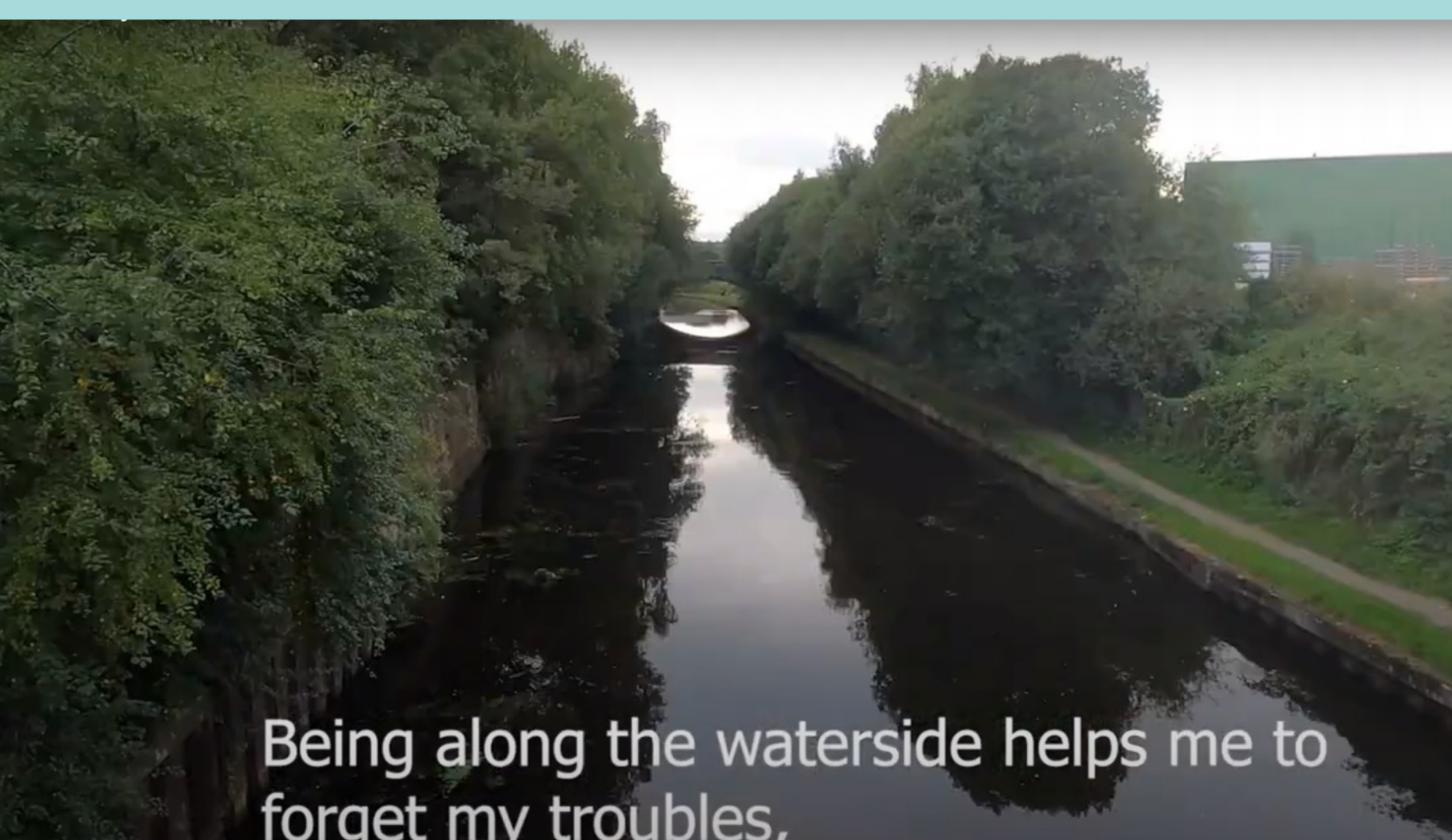


Two clay sculptures

Purpose



I wanted to tell stories
about being outside...
And I wanted to
inspire people just to
be out... that it can
work [help your
mental health]



Being along the waterside helps me to
forget my troubles,

Still image from short film

What's next?

Recommendations from the research, supported by participant feedback

1. Access to the arts is a right not a privilege - embed creative activities within healthcare plans.



creativity... is something that you need to do... you might not think you need to do it, [but] you need to do it to survive, to thrive

2. The evidence informed framework shows the value of creativity, funders need to support long-term projects.



they have got to have continuity... short term goals might be really nice, but they are not very effective in terms of people's mental health recovery

3. Recovery is an on-going, highly individual process and should not be measured as an outcome



You are giving me a life... Let's quantify it in paperwork... has my depression lifted? Well, I've had it since I was nine... I am 49, probably not.

R3connect project presents a series of artistic responses to the research including animation and music.



Get alerts about upcoming events by scanning the QR code to join the mailing list.



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- (6) Peters, L. A., Gomersall, T., Booth, A., and Lucock, L. (2023) Community arts, identity, and recovery: A realist review of how community-based arts activities enables the identity change recovery process from serious mental illness. [In amends]