WHO Foundation | Jameel Arts & Health Lab

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Field Resource

Creative Care:

A Resource for Artists Working in Humanitarian Contexts

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Front Cover Photo Credit: A participant in a Yazidi Cultural Archives art workshop, Kurdistan Region, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

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Creative Care:
A Resource for Artists Working in Humanitarian Contexts

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Contents

Freedom painting, Lalish, Iraq (2022).
Image courtesy of Amsha Ali and Yazda.

Introduction

Artistic expression is central to human experience. It is also a fundamental human right, recognized globally by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Throughout history and across cultures, communities have turned to art in times of celebration, crisis, and healing.[1]

The arts offer powerful ways to support mental health and community wellbeing, especially during emergencies such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics, or displacement.[2] Human beings, across distinct national and cultural contexts, have repeatedly turned to the arts in times of celebration, change, and loss.

Artists can play a valuable role in humanitarian responses by providing comfort and emotional regulation and promoting spaces for creative engagement, cultural validation, and social connection to affected communities. Art-based and creative activities like theatre making, circus workshops, storytelling, group drumming and singing can support psychosocial wellbeing at all phases of humanitarian care: preparedness, response, and recovery.

These activities should be designed with consideration for the existing resources, strengths, skills, and social networks within communities to encourage genuine participation and foster a sense of resilience and mutual support among community members. Furthermore, depending on the context, art-based activities can be both community self-initiated, such as collaborative group singing, playing musical instruments, or doing crafts together, or externally facilitated by local and international artists and organizations.

This guide is designed primarily for artists who wish to work in humanitarian settings and do not have specialized training in the creative arts therapies or formal psychosocial support. This document offers practical guidance for implementing artistic and creative initiatives in crisis-affected, multicultural, and multilingual settings. It emphasizes safe, respectful community engagement and collaboration with local health workers to ensure activities are culturally appropriate and aligned with community needs. The guide also supports humanitarian agencies that work with artists, offering recommendations that complement existing organizational manuals, such as the International Organization for Migration's Manual on Community-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies and Displacement.[3]

This guide is designed primarily for artists who wish to work in humanitarian settings and do not have a specialized training in the creative arts therapies or formal psychosocial support:

- **Local artists** offering arts-based activities to support the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of their own communities during times of crisis
- **Visiting and international artists** working outside their own communities who seek to provide arts-based support to crisis-affected populations in humanitarian settings
- **Community-based organizations** integrating arts and creative approaches into mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions in humanitarian contexts
- **International humanitarian agencies** collaborating with artists to deliver arts-based activities that promote the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of crisis-affected communities.

Definitions used in this guide

Mental health[4]

WHO defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

Psychosocial

Psychosocial refers to the interrelations between mind and society. In humanitarian contexts psychosocial approach lies in the interrelation of biopsychological, socioeconomic/ sociorelational and cultural factors when defining the needs of crisis-affected populations.[5]

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Modules

1. First Principles: Principles for Artists in Humanitarian Contexts

2. Collaboration & Design: Designing Arts Activities to Support Care in Humanitarian Conexts

3. Interacting with Participants: Facilitation and Interacting with Participants

4. Emotional Support: Managing Emotions in Creative Activities

5. Facilitating in Crisis Contexts: Self-Care for Artists

6. Providing Support and Training to Artists: Guidance for Organizations that Work with Artists

Module 1: Principles for Artists in Humanitarian Contexts

This module introduces key principles for artists working in humanitarian settings. Some of these principles will be discussed in more depth in the modules that follow.

Understanding Trauma and the Appropriate Role for Artists

This guide recognises that artists are not therapists, and are not expected to take on responsibility for deep trauma-related issues. In humanitarian settings, artists benefit greatly from understanding the many impacts that traumatic events can have on individuals, families, communities, and even themselves. Recognizing how distress and trauma manifest in different cultural and contextual settings, as well as understanding possible pathways to recovery, can help clarify the artist's role. This role centers on facilitating emotionally safe spaces for expression and helping participants see new ways of understanding their individual and collective experiences.

In humanitarian settings, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) refers to "any type of local or outside support aimed at protecting or promoting psychosocial well-being and/or preventing or treating mental disorders".[6] Artists engaging in these settings, whether volunteering or contracted, can play a vital role. It's crucial to approach creative practice in these sensitive environments ethically, responsibly, and effectively, guided by fundamental trauma-informed care concepts[7,8] (Box 1) and the core six principles as outlined in the IASC Guidelines on MHPSS in Emergency Settings (Box 2).[9]

Community artists can often contribute meaningfully to health and wellbeing in a psychosocially beneficial manner. Understanding the psychosocial approach in humanitarian settings (see Box 2) and how to apply it to creative work with the affected communities, can help artists deliver impactful arts-based activities. This work can support social connection, build empathy across different groups, foster resilience, and help individuals and communities navigate life transitions. While this is not therapy in the clinical sense, the effect can be therapeutic and fill an important need for communities. Artists should educate themselves about the impact of the specific kinds of experiences that individuals and communities they are working with may have faced or are facing and incorporate this knowledge into how they deliver art-based activities. Some of the questions they can ask include: In these activities, what are we asking of participants? Do these activities reinforce strengths, coping, determination, connection to others, or hope? Are there different possibilities for engagement according to each person's current state? What are some graceful ways for people to not participate? Are there referral pathways in the local contexts for further more focused and specialized support in case of need.

Commitment to Doing No Harm

It is critical to prioritize the health and well-being of participants above any artistic goals or products in any setting where there are potentially vulnerable participants, but especially in times of crisis and in humanitarian settings. The principle of "do no harm,"[10] helps ensure that creative activities do not unintentionally evoke traumatic responses. It's important to recognize that participants may become upset or emotional due to the difficult experiences they have lived through and this is not necessarily a sign of harm. Feeling sadness, anger, or grief can be a natural part of processing hardship. This is different from an involuntary and over-whelming psychological or physiological reaction to a stimulus that reminds somone of a past traumatic event. Understanding this difference is crucial in creating safe, supportive spaces that allow for emotional expression without re-traumatization.

The artist's main responsibility is to create calm, supportive experiences while staying aware for participants who may be experiencing severe psychological distress. In these cases, it is essential to recognize when and how to refer individuals to qualified healthcare professionals, such as social workers, creative arts therapists, or psychologists. To ensure that referrals are safe and effective, partnerships with local healthcare providers should be established prior to the implementation of arts-based activities. As discussed in more detail below, artists should never lead activities without the support of staff or volunteers who can help them address psychological distress as it arises. The well-being of participants, along with their self-defined needs, should always be the central priority.

Box 1: The six core principles of trauma informed care[11]

1. ***Safety:*** *Ensuring physical and emotional safety for everyone involved.*
2. ***Trustworthiness and transparency:*** *Building trust through clear communication and consistency.*
3. ***Peer support:*** *Encouraging shared experiences to build community and support.*
4. ***Collaboration and mutuality:*** *Emphasizing partnership and minimizing power dynamics by sharing decision-making and responsibility.*
5. ***Empowerment and choice:*** *Prioritizing individual strengths and offering choices in decision-making processes to encourage active participation in achieving one's own goals.*
6. ***Cultural, historical, and gender awareness:*** *Acknowledging and addressing the cultural and societal contexts that influence a person's experience of trauma.*

It is important to consider how to advocate for participants when their needs diverge from the objectives of partnering organizations or funders.

Responsible Boundaries

Artists can contribute to community well-being without crossing professional boundaries by understanding and respecting the difference between supportive, culturally enriching activities and mental health support that requires a specialist. The International Organization for Migration categorizes creative activities according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) MHPSS intervention pyramid,[12] describing art-based activities in four categories (Figure 1). Creative activities guided by trauma-informed principles (Box 1), can progressively support communities beyond initial stress relief. After establishing safety and reassurance, activities may support emotional regulation, build social connections, and enhance resilience. Clear understanding of professional boundaries is essential. In general, artists can create and maintain safe, culturally enriching spaces; creative health practitioners with additional training can facilitate emotional regulation; while deeper therapeutic exploration of trauma and more severe psychological distress remains the responsibility of certified creative arts therapists and allied professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers (Figure 2).[13]

Box 2: IASC guidelines on MHPSS in emergency settings: Core principles[15]

1. *Human rights and equality*
2. *Participation*
3. *Do no harm*
4. *Building on available resources and capacities*
5. *Integrated support system*
6. *Multi-layered*

Figure 1: Creative Activities along the MHPSS pyramid (IOM 2022)[14]

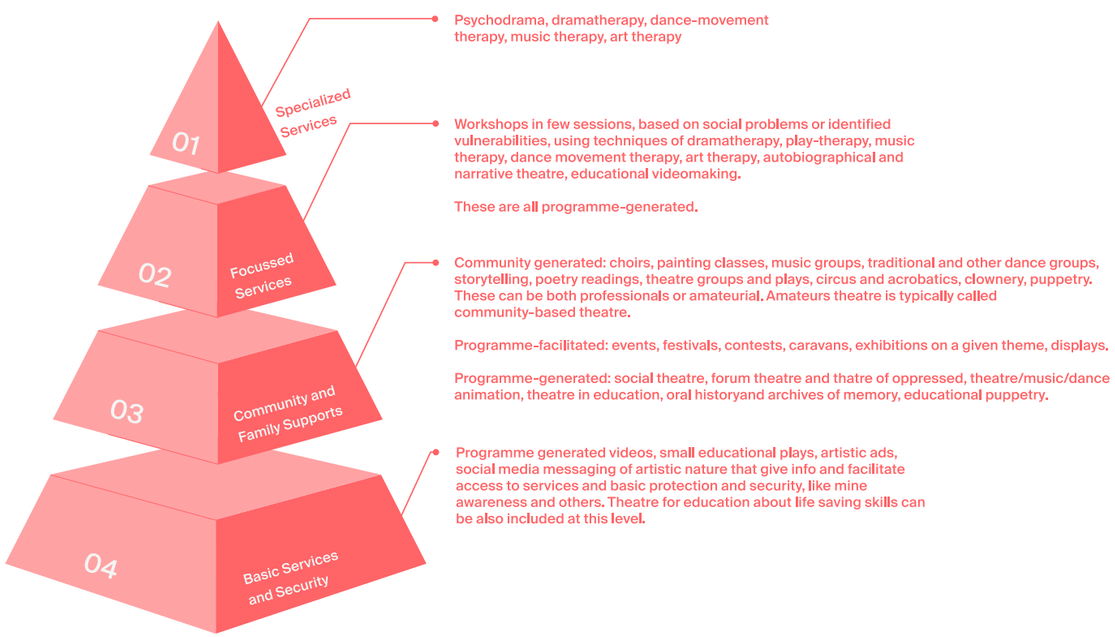


Figure 2: Expertise of creative personnel in relation to complexity of creative activity

A Participant Centered Approach

Central to trauma-informed care is the principle of meeting participants emotionally "where they are", meaning authentically acknowledging and respectfully responding to their emotional states as they emerge. This involves creating safe enough spaces where genuine feelings can be expressed without fear of judgment or harm. By practicing "accompaniment," the artist co-creates a shared sense of place and presence with participants, attentively observing nonverbal cues and maintaining emotional sensitivity.

Artists should let participants decide how they want to engage– how they share and take ownership of their stories, what support they wish to receive, and the pace at which the project unfolds. It is essential for artists to carefully consider their positionality and motivations, especially when coming from outside the affected community.

Project design and activity implementation should be collaborative, fostering equitable relationships and aligning with community participatory approaches. Artists must resist the temptation to become the 'hero artist,' and instead work in genuine partnership with local organizations, offering their skills and knowledge while allowing local partners and community members to guide the process. This collaborative approach builds trust and encourages participants and partnering organizations to engage according to their own comfort levels.

Practicing Cultural Humility and Respect

Cultural humility is equally important. Artists, especially those from outside the community, must continuously reflect on their positionality, biases, and privileges, while actively seeking community guidance to ensure their creative methods are culturally relevant and appropriate. For instance, in theatre workshops, physical contact is often part of exercises, but in some cultures, this may be considered inappropriate, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity. Since culture and cultural sensitivity cover a wide range of topics, it's essential to consider factors such as differences in personal space or communication styles. Collaborating closely with local artists, cultural leaders, community representatives and the participants themselves ensures that creative engagements respect and celebrate local traditions and knowledge, avoiding potential cultural insensitivity or harm. Artists are encouraged to design programming that builds on locally familiar and appreciated artistic practices, drawing from participants' own cultural and creative traditions, rather than imposing outside artistic practices that may not resonate with the community.
Activities that align with the community's cultural values can support broader social change by highlighting how systems can be more accountable to local needs.

The Healing Power of Listening and Expression

The greatest skill an artist can bring to bear in a crisis context is the ability to observe and listen with attention, compassion and respect. Even before a note is played, an image drawn, or a word spoken, the safety of the 'magic circle' is simply created by the artist's ability to command attention by paying attention. This caring attention gives the vulnerable person a sense of hope and agency before anything has been expressed and supports the beginning of a journey to recovery and resilience that creative expression can bring.

Comprehensive Assessment of the Humanitarian Context

Before starting any activity, artists should carefully assess the specific humanitarian context, both externally and internally. Externally, practical realities must guide project design. These include the availability of basic resources, location safety, and stage of emergency response (preparedness, immediate response, or recovery). Internally, artists must assess their capacity, experience, training, and understanding of the community's broader social and cultural dynamics. Reflecting honestly on motivations, clearly identifying their roles (whether volunteer, contracted, or researcher), and confirming adequate resources can promote ethical, safe, and beneficial engagement. Artists should be aware of how their work could be co-opted through funding, policy, or partnerships, potentially serving purposes in conflict or humanitarian situations that undermine the ethics of their practice.

Collaborative Partnerships and Support Structures

Collaboration with trusted local and international partners is crucial. Such partners provide critical insights into community contexts, ensuring projects address genuine local needs and preferences, while outlining existing resources and structures. These partnerships should include clearly defined roles, expectations, timelines, and responsibilities. Importantly, the partner organizations must provide psychosocial support structures for both artists and participants, allowing artists to remain safely focused on creative delivery without inadvertently crossing therapeutic boundaries. Collaborative partnerships and capacity building training for local partners and local community artists can support the continuation of sustainable practices and art-based activities.

Artist Well-being and Self-care

Artist wellbeing and self-care are often overlooked but essential considerations in emergency contexts. By recognizing risks of burnout, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion, artists can take proactive steps to create routines for rest, reflection, and self-care. Regular debriefing and supervision with qualified psychosocial professionals or mentors can support emotional health and sustainability of practice.

Box 3: Four principles for ethical care[16] adapted for artistic projects

Beneficence

Clearly identify the health, mental health or psychosocial benefits that will come from participating in your artistic/creative program and make sure that the project is set up to achieve them.

Respect for Autonomy

Respect the identities, stories and artistic products of the participants and ask them how they want to be (re)presented. Always work with informed consent.

Non Maleficence

Strive to do no harm. Arts practices sometimes carry risks that can lead to harm because the activity or the personal expression that follows from it may be too much for the participant. Develop projects where the health benefits will outweigh the potential harm. Create systems for feedback and evaluation that help participants and partners communicate their concerns as they arise.

Justice

Make sure that your project actively supports participation for all, addressing special access needs. Work with the community to understand how your project aligns with local efforts to strive for different types of justice that are relevant to the emergency context (social, economic, environmental, criminal, etc).

Ensuring Ethical and Meaningful Community Participation

Ensuring meaningful community participation across all phases of a project—from planning and implementation to evaluation—strengthens community ownership. Participants should be actively involved in decision-making on artistic authorship, project design, the creative process, and how their work and stories are shared. Where possible, they should also help define the indicators of success used in the evaluation. Ethical engagement requires clarity on informed consent, authorship, ownership, distribution of funds, and the careful, consensual sharing of creative outputs and any documentation of the process. Participant comfort, dignity, and safety at all stages should be a priority at all stages. (Box 3).

Safeguarding and Risk Mitigation

Effective safeguarding and risk mitigation protocols must be clearly established, respecting local and international humanitarian laws and policies concerning protection of children and vulnerable adults, data privacy, and confidentiality. Clear mechanisms for recognizing, reporting, and responding to safeguarding concerns must be explicitly defined, ensuring participant safety and trust. Be clear in advance how partnering organisations will share responsibility for participant support. Partner organizations should offer support and provide necessary referrals for needed health, mental health, or social support. This will be addressed further in modules 3 and 4.

Inclusive and Accessible Creative Spaces

Within the limitations of the crisis situation, artists and partner organisations should try to create spaces that are physically accessible, inclusive, and culturally appropriate. These spaces should feel welcoming and accommodate a range of needs, including physical or cognitive disabilities, transportation needs, and provision of necessary supports (food, drink, accessible tools). It's also important to consider daily cultural and religious practices, where relevant, to create a respectful and supportive environment. Where appropriate and needed, providing designated female-friendly spaces can help support the comfort, safety, and inclusion of women and girls. Flexible engagement pathways allow participants to comfortably choose their level of involvement or gracefully opt out, supporting autonomy and comfort. Consider how participants will access the space you are working in, especially those who have additional needs such as physical disabilities: Is the space safe? Is it warm and welcoming? Can the partner organisation offer food and drinks, arrange transportation, and address accessibility? What adaptations can you provide for participants with other disabilities? Can participants engage virtually if needed and relevant? It is also important to create a safe space for emotional expression. A safe space fosters trust and enables the participants to express their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment or discrimination. It relies on confidentiality and a respectful, inclusive atmosphere that encourages open and honest interaction.

Understanding Social Determinants and Local Justice Frameworks

Understanding social determinants of health and local justice frameworks strengthens project relevance and impact. Artists should investigate how their work can align with social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political factors affecting the community. When thoughtfully designed, with local participation, these projects can contribute meaningfully to ongoing local justice initiatives.

Measuring Impact and Accountability

Having a well-defined objective for the project can help measure impact and maintain accountability from beginning to end. Clear, achievable outcomes and evaluation methods should guide the work, with transparent mechanisms for monitoring, feedback, documentation, and reporting to the community, partner organisations, and funders. Actively involve participants in identifying what matters to them and what healing and progress look like for them - this ensures that the program design and evaluation focus on the right goals. Not all artists may have the skills or experience to carry out monitoring and evaluation, so it's important to work in partnership with qualified practitioners and organizations to ensure these processes are conducted using the appropriate tools in an ethical and respectful way. Sharing best practices, challenges, and lessons learned in a respectful, ethical manner contributes significantly to future work in arts-based psychosocial support within humanitarian contexts.

Sustainability and Ethical Exit Strategies

Sustainability and ethical exit strategies are vital considerations. Artists must plan responsibly for project conclusions, clearly communicating end-points to participants and partners to avoid unintended emotional or social harm caused by disappointed expectations. Sustainability also involves capacity-building, training, and mentoring local artists and community members to ensure that creative initiatives leave lasting positive impacts and skills within the community.

Participants in a Yazidi Cultural Archives photography workshop, Kurdistan Region, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Case Story

Re-conectando

Author & Artist: Héctor Aristizabal

Location: Colombia

Our primary goal has been to support Colombia's Truth Commission and to raise awareness about how, in addition to people, nature has also been a victim of the war in Colombia. In pursuit of this objective, we have collaborated with a wide range of individuals and groups, including victims and ex-combatants associated with various armed factions such as the Colombian Army, different guerrilla groups like FARC and EPL, and paramilitary groups including AUC and others. Additionally, we have extended our outreach to include social and environmental leaders, academics, local political figures, and personnel from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Employing a combination of methodologies such as Joanna Macy's The Work That Reconnects (TWR),[17] social theater, and healing rituals, Re-Conectando has successfully created safe spaces for truth-telling, providing an avenue for individuals to acknowledge and honor the profound pain inflicted by the war. Through these processes, improbable dialogues have been guided, facilitating interactions between ex-combatants from opposing sides and their victims. This initiative has also heightened awareness of the pivotal role that nature has assumed throughout the conflict, reconnecting us to mother nature as our ancestral teacher and healer.

"Working as artists alongside communities scarred by profound wounds and collective trauma demands that we embark on a journey of self-reflection and personal healing."

From the very beginning of our journey, we recognized that while art, particularly theatre, played a crucial role, it alone was insufficient to address the profound wounds we encountered when working with ex-combatants and victims representing diverse groups involved in Colombia's conflict. Our commitment to moving beyond the prevailing anthropocentric paradigm that had characterized the work of most Truth Commissions compelled us to blend our artistic endeavors with the methodologies of deep ecology, notably drawing inspiration from TWR. More-over, as we delved deeper into our work, we recognized the necessity of collective healing mechanisms to respond to the collective trauma that emerged through the stories shared. Consequently, the development of healing rituals emerged as a vital component of our process.

Recently, during a laboratory in the Putumayo region of Colombia located near the Amazon basin, we gathered as a group around an ancient tree to start a day of honoring our pain for the world. As in past laboratories, I intended to teach a song from Burkina Faso that I had learned from my mentor, Malidoma Some of the Dagara Tribe. This song was a call to the ancestors, asking for their presence as we honored our pain and the pain of the world. However, in that moment, Taita Ricardo and Mama Charito, both indigenous people from the Camsá community, approached me with gentle but firm determination. They requested a moment to conduct their own ritual, one rooted in their ancestral traditions, invoking the spirits of the earth and seeking permission and support from mother nature. They connected us all to the mycelia of their territory, using the roots of the giant ancient higueron tree we have chosen. They purified and cleansed us with fragrances, both alcohol-based and traditional. After completing their ritual, they turned to me, apologized for the interruption, and said, "Now you can continue."

In that transformative 30 minutes, I keenly understood the significance of their actions. My ego had been filled with shame as I realized my mistake of not seeking their guidance to open the ritual before starting. Re-Conectando had always practiced this with the elders, especially when they represented indigenous or Afro-Colombian groups deeply connected to their ancient traditions. Although I had contemplated asking them to conduct a ceremony after the African song, I had not communicated this intention to the indigenous elders. Taita Ricardo and MamaCharito's powerful ritual forced me to reckon with my oversight.

I fell to my knees, thanked them for welcoming us to their territory, apologized for not respecting their customs, and sought forgiveness for unintentionally perpetuating a form of colonization by imposing other practices, despite my good intentions.

Later, I commended them for their courage in asserting their rightful place and order of things in their territory. While Re-Conectando had invited them to the process, it was they who received us on their land. This act of truth and reconciliation became a profound opening to trust and honesty that infused the rest of our encounter. It exemplified the principles of "trying to teach what we most need to learn" and "opening Re-Conectando to the power of local medicines," which I had expressed rhetorically on so many occasions.

Working as artists alongside communities scarred by profound wounds and collective trauma demands that we embark on a journey of self-reflection and personal healing. This is not only essential for our own growth and evolution but also integral to our capacity to effectively engage with these communities. Our psyches are intricately woven into the fabric of the process, inseparable from the unfolding narrative.

Module 2: Designing Arts Activities to Support Care in Humanitarian Contexts

Artists can play a significant role across all phases of humanitarian care: preparedness, emergency response, and recovery.[18] Creative activities include, but are not limited to, community generated and externally facilitated art activities, such as music, dance, theatre, clowning, collaborative murals, photography, as well as storytelling, and group craft sessions. These activities may support community cohesion, emotional expression, and psychosocial wellbeing (Box 4).

Box 4: The Role of Artists in Three Phases of Humanitarian Response

1. **Preparedness –** *Involves planning, training, and educating communities before disasters. For example, theater, music, and visual storytelling can be used in public awareness campaigns and emergency drills to make preparedness messages more engaging and memorable.*

2. **Emergency Response –** *Focuses on immediate action to minimize harm and provide aid. Artists can support this phase by offering real-time accompaniment and crisis communication through public performances, such street theater and clown shows, alleviating distress by singing or playing instruments together, group dancing, or creating digital media to relay vital safety information in accessible ways.*

3. **Recovery –** *Aims to restore normalcy and rebuild communities. Artists can aid in emotional healing through, for example, community murals, social theatre, circus arts, photovoice, movement practices, and storytelling projects. These can help affected populations engage in emotional expression, reframe process traumatic experiences, regain a sense of identity, and foster resilience and connection.*

Collaborative Project Design and Delivery

Artists may engage in humanitarian contexts as local volunteers, employees of humanitarian agencies and local artistic organisations, initiators of independent projects, or collaborators with researchers utilizing creative methods. Regardless of how one is engaged, inclusive and effective arts activities depend on strong collaboration with local participants, partners and, where appropriate, international organisations. Partnership provides a vital support structure and ensures activities align with community needs. Before starting any art activity or project, it is important to consider opportunities for co-creation and implementation and to consult extensively with local partners and community members to understand their perspectives, priorities, and availability of existing resources.

Artists should establish clear collaborative processes, defining roles and responsibilities, decision-making structures, resource management, feedback methods, and conflict resolution strategies. To prevent unintended emotional consequences and lower the risk of harm, short-term projects should clearly indicate their beginning and end and be clear about whether any follow-up will take place. Long-term or relationship-building projects require thoughtful consideration of all project phases and objectives.

Setting Meaningful and Realistic Project Goals

Well-planned creative arts projects can provide a safe space, enhance self-esteem, foster relationships, strengthen community identity, and inspire hope for the future. What are the goals of the program, workshop, or arts activity and how are these determined and with whom?[19] Clear, realistic objectives are especially crucial in humanitarian contexts, while also assessing potential risks and developing appropriate mitigation strategies. Figure 3 illustrates a theoretical model of how the arts can help to improve health and well-being. By following this model, artists can work with community partners and participants to clearly articulate shared goals and intended outcomes. Together with co-implementing partners, artists should identify the specific social and wellbeing issues the art project seeks to address and confirm the availability of adequate psychosocial resources to support these objectives.

Artists should reflect on their personal and professional values and consider how they align or differ from those of the community. They can recognize that diverse ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic identities can shape different perspectives. Understanding the historical and socio-economic context of a community helps ensure that project design is inclusive and does not reinforce existing power imbalances.

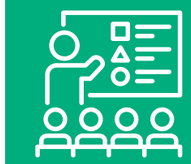
Attention should also be given to identifying potential conflicts and exploring ways to resolve or respectfully acknowledge differences in the process of setting project goals.

General Workshop and Activity Design

Crisis-affected humanitarian contexts often create uncertainty, making the structured design of creative workshops essential for participants' comfort and engagement. When social ties are weakened, particularly in situations of violence, displacement, or conflict, community-based psychosocial interventions that are both structured and continuous play a vital role in fostering mutual respect, restoring trust, and rebuilding interpersonal relationships.[20] Artists should clearly communicate the workshop structure and expectations. It is important to distinguish between one-off activities and a more sustained series of workshops. While one-time events can offer short-term relief or expression, a series of workshops with the same group enables deeper engagement, supports group cohesion, builds trust, and strengthens social bonds that are necessary for meaningful psychosocial impact. Continuous engagement also allows for appropriate follow-up and referrals when needed, contributing to a more supportive and responsive environment.

To ensure successful implementation, logistical planning is critical. This includes regular communication with other implementing and humanitarian partners in the field, as well as aligning the workshop and activity times with participants' existing commitments, such as school, work, religious observances to create possibilities for wider participation. Whether it's a single workshop or a part of a longer-term process, programs should offer multiple ways for participants to engage based on their comfort levels. Build trust gradually, allowing spontaneity only after mutual trust and comfort have been established. Below is a commonly used approach to designing a workshop that offers a container to hold creative, social and emotional engagement. Creative activities can be integrated into each phase

Box 5: Sample Collage Workshop on Individual and Community Strengths (10-12 participants)



Opening:

Clearly introduce your role, intention, and session structure. Facilitate introductions and create general group agreements to foster safety and comfort. You may also want to include a space—such as a designated board or sheet—where participants can add thoughts, questions, or ideas that arise during the session. This allows them to share what matters to them without disrupting the overall flow of the process.

Connecting:

Engage participants in short, interactive activities in pairs or small groups to remember each other's names, create a non-judgemental atmosphere, establish relationships, and build rapport.

Creating:

Introduce the main creative activity, emphasizing participation over artistic perfection. Begin with simple, accessible tasks, gradually building confidence and skills over time.

Sharing:

Invite participants to share their creative work (if it is a tangible work) or experiences to the degree that they are comfortable doing so. Facilitate reflection about both the process and product, including challenges and positive experiences.

Closing:

Revisit the workshop's purpose, acknowledge participant contributions, and invite final reflections, both verbal and non-verbal depending on the participants' preference. Encourage participants to voice their closing thoughts or future intentions.

(Box 5).

Additional Considerations

- Consider how one activity links with the next: is there a connective thread in the material being used, the format participants are working within (e.g. pairs, small groups, large group), or the emerging themes?

- Utilize flexible and adaptive approaches, frequently incorporating your observations, participant feedback, and adjusting activities to their evolving interests, needs, capacities, and preferences. At times artists might have to completely shift the content and the pre-planned agenda of the workshop based on the arising needs of the group. It's important for the artists to come prepared with alternative tools and exercises to adjust swiftly.

- Allowing both solo and group creation time can, over time, contribute to a sense of trust and safety in the group. Allocate enough time within the sharing phase of a workshop to invite reflections.

- Participants will need less formal structure the more familiar they become with each other. However, maintaining a clear opening and closing can contribute to a sense of safety and predictability in the group, such as having the same type of exercises for warm-up and closing each time. Once the participants are familiar with one another, they can be invited to facilitate these opening and closing exercises themselves, giving them agency.

- Emphasize the quality of participants' experiences over artistic outcomes, reinforcing an ethos of inclusivity, accessibility, and meaningful engagement for everyone involved.

- Promote cultural diversity and exchange among participant groups, actively recognizing and addressing differences related to language, legal status, gender identity, religion, and other identities. Proactively adapt content and methods to ensure a high degree of access and participation. Remain mindful of potential power dynamics, particularly in conflict settings, and take care not to reinforce or intensify them.

- When working within your own community, remain attentive to how stress from emergencies can amplify existing tensions. Strive for inclusivity and respectful representation of diverse experiences. If working outside your cultural or community context, collaborate closely with local partners to adapt your approaches. Learn and integrate culturally resonant behaviors and activities that foster trust and enable meaningful engagement.

- Take time to learn the cultural norms of the community you're working with. In some cultures, for example, physical contact between men and women may be unacceptable, or direct eye contact may be considered disrespectful. Instead of assuming what's appropriate based on general cultural knowledge, always seek consent— for instance, before placing a hand on someone's shoulder during an exercise. Stay flexible and prepared to adapt your approach to be respectful to diverse cultural expectations and practices.

- Regularly engage in self-reflection and informal evaluation during and after sessions to remain responsive to participants' shifting needs and emotional states.

- Workshops generally evolve from initial stages of individual empowerment and safe expression towards collaborative creative endeavors that address shared community challenges and produce outputs meaningful to participants and the broader community.

- Facilitators, whether artists or mental health practitioners, should manage their own anxiety and be honest about their limits. Working in sensitive contexts can bring uncertainty, even for the most experienced. It's normal to feel challenged. What matters is staying focused on learning and improving. Like participants, facilitators bring their own backgrounds and emotions into the space. Being reflective and open to self-critique will support adapting and growing in diverse settings.

Tears of Hope painting, Duhok, Iraq (2022).
Image courtesy of Yazda

Maintaining Professional Boundaries and Ethical Practice

Artists working in humanitarian contexts must uphold professional and ethical standards. Below are a set of guidelines adapted from the ethical code developed by U.S. National Organization for Arts in Health:[21]

Duty of Care and Safeguarding:

Ensure participants' safety, proactively preventing harm, abuse, and injury. Report any safeguarding concerns to appropriate organisational representatives.

Confidentiality:

Maintain strict confidentiality regarding personal participant information. Share only relevant information with collaborating organisations for wellbeing support.

Avoiding Unqualified Advice:

Clearly understand the limits of your expertise. Avoid offering personal advice on health, mental health, or situational decisions.

Appropriate Personal Boundaries:

Refrain from personal relationships with participants outside professional contexts to maintain emotional safety and ethical clarity.

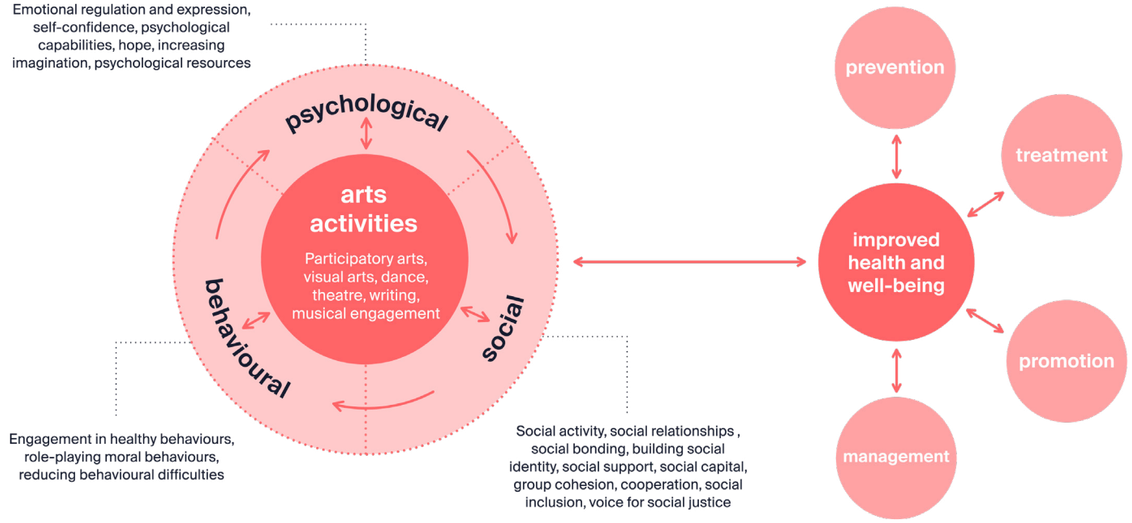
Professional Conduct:

Do not discuss work grievances or organisational challenges with participants. Maintain professional integrity.

Clear Financial and Personal Boundaries:

Never lend or give money, engage in substance use, or form sexual relationships with participants, ensuring clear and appropriate professional boundaries

Figure 3: Theoretical model of how the arts can help to improve health and well-being[22]



Box 6: Sample Workshop on Individual and Community Strengths

Preparation:
Prior to beginning, ensure that you have a diverse and representative set of images and enough materials to work with. Materials can also include textiles and found natural objects (e.g grasses, small sticks, flowers).

Opening (10 min):
When you are ready to begin, invite participants to sit in a circle around the collage materials. Clearly introduce yourself, your role, the nature of the workshop and how long it will be. Set agreements with the group to nurture an inclusive and welcoming space.

Connecting (10 min):
Invite participants to select one image that reminds them of their own or their community's strengths. Invite them to introduce themselves and include one way that they are similar to the object that they chose.

Creating (30 min):
Introduce the collage activity and orient participants to the materials, calling their attention to the images. Invite participants to explore layering and attaching the images (collaging) on their own paper. Emphasizing experimentation and participation over artistic perfection.

Sharing (15 min):
Clear a space where the collages (finished or in progress) can be presented, either individually or in connection with one another. The symbolism of bringing individual contributions into a larger whole may be sufficient to convey a sense of the collective. If desired, participants can also be invited to comment on the strengths that they explored in their own collage or that they observe in the collective collage. Always provide the option to simply participate by listening (to "pass a turn" if desired).

Closing (10 min):
Do a final go-around and ask participants to comment on one thing they may have found challenging about the workshop and one thing that they enjoyed. Thank participants for their participation.

Case Story

The Shaken Heart

Author: Bettina Evans
Location: Lyttelton, New Zealand

The 2011 Christchurch earthquakes left large parts of the city's infrastructure destroyed or damaged. The same held true for the small port town of Lyttelton - all public gathering spaces such as churches, halls, clubs, pubs, restaurants, schools, shops, libraries, and museums were closed for several weeks or more after the initial large shake. This meant that most adults were unable to go to work, children could not attend school, and people's houses were broken, unsafe, or overcrowded with friends and relations who needed shelter. Fortunately it was summer so people were able to spend time outside, which felt safer as heavy aftershocks continued to roll relentlessly day after day, damaging houses further.

This project happened spontaneously, with minimal planning, out of a wish to provide a space to gather and meet. Within 24 hours we gathered whatever stitching materials we could find in our houses- some needles, thread, buttons, scissors and old woollen blankets. We opened a sun umbrella, put down a rug, and sat on the sidewalk in front of the closed library on Main Street. We cut out woollen hearts, decorated them with a button and a few stitches, and put them in a basket.

When people approached us, we offered a heart with a safety pin so they could attach it to their clothes and invited them to join us. People were touched and moved by this little gift and many sat down and started stitching hearts for other strangers or for family and friends. We had so many people join us on this first day that we continued this activity every day for six weeks. Our ongoing presence provided an anchor point and continuity in the unpredictable chaos following the disaster.

"We had so many people join us on this first day that we continued this activity every day for six weeks. Our ongoing presence provided an anchor point and continuity in the unpredictable chaos following the disaster."

Looking back, there were many aspects which made this activity so successful. In the traumatic first days and weeks after the earthquake everyone felt stressed and either overloaded with a plethora of emotions- fear, survivors guilt, confusion, sadness -or numbed by the enormity of this new reality.

A simple activity like stitching requires no skill, thought, or decision-making. Everyone was able to take part in cutting out hearts, sewing on a button, moving a needle with thread through material, or carrying the basket to offer hearts to strangers. Children loved playing with the big button tin. Those that needed company could sit with the stitchers, either in companionable silence or engaged in conversation. Everyone's presence was welcome and included. Those that had no time or energy to stitch often returned with some lace scraps or buttons for us to use. Some baked biscuits to share. Community was being rebuilt.

One of the surprises for us was the willingness of everyone on the street to engage– when offered a heart, people reacted with a smile, gratefulness, and sometimes tears and a hug. When joining the stitching, everyone connected freely and graciously with everyone else in the circle – I have no memories of any difficult situation or problems of any kind arising. We did not plan, we had no funding, we had never done anything like this before, and had no idea whether it would work. And yet with the simplest means we managed to create a friendly, safe haven built on kindness and inclusion.

Module 3: Facilitation and Interacting with Participants

In humanitarian contexts, people affected by crises can feel scared, confused, and bereft of their usual ways of coping. Arts and creative activities can take people's minds off the distress they are feeling. Delivering these in a spirit of caring may help shift the emotional state of individuals and groups. No matter what the result of the art activity, the way care is communicated during the process is just as important as the creative outcomes and the art itself.

This module offers some suggestions on facilitating art activities and engaging with participants. It includes tips on making a good first impression, helping participants feel comfortable, using active listening, and organising artistic and creative activities to foster social connections.

First Impressions

How you present yourself to a person or group is just as important as the creative activity you are facilitating. Your introduction, tone of voice, and body language can significantly influence how participants perceive you, impacting whether they trust you and feel at ease in your presence. This presentation also shapes their response, determining whether they accept your invitation to engage or choose to withdraw from the activity. Ultimately, these initial interactions can affect a participant's road to recovery, influencing what they take away from the engagement and how it supports their physical and emotional process of healing.

Helping Others Feel Comfortable with You

For a person to feel supported by you, they first need to trust you and feel comfortable in your presence. Even when someone appears agitated or confused, you can communicate more effectively and potentially de-escalate a tense situation by approaching them with kindness and respect. Clearly introduce yourself by stating your name and role, speak with a calm and soft tone at a moderate volume, and maintain an open and relaxed posture. When possible, consider establishing safe or quiet spaces where participants can retreat if they need a break from the activity. If language barriers arise, collaborate with community partners to provide interpretation, and address f the needs of participants with other communication challenges.

Supporting Others with Active Listening

Listening is the most essential part of supportive communication. In crisis situations, people will often want to share their experiences. You may or may not know how to respond to what they say, especially if it is challenging. It may seem that you're being asked to offer a solution and this feels outside your capacity or responsibility. Ilow people to speak in their own time and listen carefully so that you can truly understand their situation and needs, help them feel calm, and be able to offer appropriate support that is useful to them (Box 7).

Be aware of both your words and your body language. This includes your facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and the way you sit or stand in relation to the other person. Be sure to speak and behave in ways that are appropriate and respectful, according to the person's culture, age, gender and religion. Do not pressure the person to speak if they do not want to.

Use supportive phrases to show empathy ("I understand what you are saying") and acknowledge any losses or challenging feelings that the person shares ("I am so sorry to hear that", "That sounds like a difficult situation"). Modules 4 and 5 offer more guidance on how to respond when you hear challenging stories or experiences and how to care for yourself as you do this work.

Box 7: Active Listening

Active listening is a technique to help you listen well and communicate supportively. It involves 3 steps:

Listen attentively: *Really try to understand the person's point of view and feelings. Let them talk; remain quiet until they have finished. Block out distractions – is it noisy around? Can you go somewhere quieter? Can you calm your mind and focus on the person and what they are saying? Be warm, open and relaxed in the way you present yourself.*

Repeat: *Repeat messages and key words the person has said, e.g. "You say looking after your children while things are so chaotic can be overwhelming." Ask for clarification if there is something you didn't understand, e.g. "I didn't quite understand what you said just then, could you please explain again?"*

Summarize at the end what you have understood: *Identify and reflect key points you heard the person say, so that they know you have heard them and to be sure you have understood them correctly, e.g. "From what you have just said, I understand that you are mainly worried about [summarize main concerns they have expressed], is that correct?" Describe what you have heard, rather than interpreting how they feel about the situation (e.g. don't say: "You must feel horrible/devastated"). Don't judge them or their situation.*

Support Social Connections

Engaging in creative activities, one-on-one or in a group, can be a gateway to social connection. WHO Member States have formally recognized social connection as a public health priority during May 2025 World Health Assembly.[23] The new resolution urges the governments to promote social connection and inclusion as part of public health efforts through a diverse range of approaches. Arts-based activities and creative approaches can offer an atmosphere where you build rapport and trust, encourage interaction, and make space for people's vulnerability while supporting positive interactions between them. Simply being in the same space where art is being shared can make these connections easier. As engaging with the art or creative activity opens people up, you can encourage them to talk about the experience with each other, which creates a sense of mutual support. This sense of caring and mutual support is vital to wellbeing among crisis-affected communities.

The workshop design principles described in Box 5 of Module 2 (opening, connecting, creating, sharing, and closing) can help build these social connections. Working together in pairs or small groups gives people a chance to get to know each other better. Don't forget the magic of sharing food, drink and social time to help people feel sustained and to provide informal opportunities for conversation. The longer the engagement (eg, multiple sessions), the more opportunities there are for participants to build relationships and strengthen their own web of support.

Box 8: Listening with your eyes, ears, and heart

Listen with your:

EYES *to give the participant your undivided attention*

EARS *to truly hear their concerns*

HEART *to offer care by showing respect and empathy*

Case Study

Virtual Bridges: An Arts-Based Psychosocial Project for Refugee Youth

Author: UNHCR
Location: Algeria, Czechia, Indonesia, Uganda

Virtual Bridges is an innovative arts-based program designed to support the mental health and well-being of forcibly displaced youth through a blend of community-centered art-making, digital literacy and design, and immersive virtual reality (VR) experiences. Implemented in humanitarian settings, the project offers young refugees opportunities to express themselves, build social connections, and develop skills that contribute to their resilience and sense of agency.

Launched in 2024 in Czechia, Indonesia, Uganda, and Algeria—Virtual Bridges was developed as a pilot project in partnership with UNHCR, Artolution, and local actors, including community-based organizations. It is grounded in a mental health and wellbeing informed approach that recognizes the strengths and resilience of young people who have experienced conflict, loss, and forced displacement. In each location, the program was tailored to the context: working with South Sudanese youth in Uganda; Ukrainian refugees in Czechia; Afghan, Pakistani and Rohingya youth in Indonesia; and Sahrawi refugees in Algeria. Artist facilitators were trained not only in creative practices but also in how to hold space with empathy, safety, and care.

Program Structure

Virtual Bridges unfolds in three interconnected phases:

1. Digital Art Making

Youth begin with workshops in graphic design and creative digital tools, such as Procreate. By integrating psychosocially informed art directives, these sessions are designed to build resilience and confidence, foster peer relationships, and introduce skills that have the potential for future income generation.

2. Community Murals

This phase bridges the digital and physical worlds. In the digital workshops, participants co-design murals that reflect themes important to them, such as emotional resilience, identity, human rights and peaceful coexistence. The murals are created with and for the wider community, and their public unveilings become moments of shared celebration, fostering pride, visibility, and social cohesion.

3. VR Art-Making and Cross-Border Co-Creation

Youth engage in virtual reality workshops using programs such as MultiBrush along with Meta Quest VR headsets. Together, they create within shared virtual spaces where they can paint, sculpt, and ultimately connect across borders. Live video sessions connect sites across borders, enabling cultural exchange, shared storytelling, and meaningful connection among peers who may never meet in person but share parallel experiences of displacement.

Preliminary Impact

Early data from pre- and post-program assessments show promising results: participants report increased emotional well-being, stronger social connections, new friendships, and a more hopeful outlook for the future. Youth have shared improvements in self-expression, confidence, and creative engagement—particularly through their immersive experiences in virtual reality.

“When I put on the VR headset, it felt like I was free. It’s something I’ll never forget, and it helped me see the world in a whole new way.”

— Male South Sudanese refugee, Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda

“You put on the goggles, and it’s a void. But as you draw, it becomes beautiful—and even better with others.”

— Female Ukrainian refugee, Czechia

Through cross-border VR collaboration and live video exchange, participants not only connected creatively but also learned about the lives, hopes, and visions of other refugee youth in different parts of the world. Many reflected on how this experience reshaped their understanding of what it means to be displaced—building empathy, expanding their worldview, and fostering a shared sense of identity across borders.

Artists facilitating the sessions also observed noticeable shifts in group dynamics: stronger peer support networks, more open collaboration and trust, and a growing sense of collective responsibility. In many cases, participants who began the program quiet and hesitant emerged as group leaders, offering guidance, encouragement, and empathy to their peers.

Key Takeaways for Artists in Humanitarian Contexts

- **Create Safe and Supportive Spaces**
  Establish consistent routines and a welcoming space where young people feel safe to explore and express.
- **Center Youth Voice**
  Let participants shape the themes and direction of the creative work based on their lived experiences.
- **Strengthen Peer Connection**
  Use collaborative formats—both digital and physical—to reduce isolation and build belonging.
- **Value Skill-Building**
  Integrate technical and creative skills that support both self-expression and future opportunities.

Virtual Bridges reminds us that art is not a luxury. For displaced youth, it can be a powerful tool for healing, hope, and connection—and a way to reimagine futures, together. By integrating access to creative digital tools and immersive technologies, the project affirms that displaced youth—like all young people—have the right to engage with innovation, expression, and connection, even in humanitarian settings.

Module 4: Managing Emotions in Creative Activities

The uncertainty created by humanitarian situations can bring up many difficult emotions for people. In the moment of crises, the focus might be on survival and just getting through a dangerous, challenging and frightening situation. In the aftermath, some emotions can get buried as people try to rebuild their lives. Creative engagement can release emotion and help people process the enormity of what they have been through.

Sometimes artists may deliver activities intentionally designed to help people process these emotions and experiences. When this is the intention, it is best to have these activities co-designed and co-led by mental health professionals including, but not limited to, music therapists, art therapists, dance movement therapists, and drama therapists. Artists have an important role to play, but their primary focus should be on the arts activity, with psychosocial support being the responsibility of those who have the appropriate training to do so.

Distressing emotions and reactions can also arise inadvertently in the process of witnessing or engaging in art and creative activities or talking to others while being together. It is empathetic and humane to want to respond when this happens and artists can often start with the active listening skills described in Module 3.

However, sometimes a person's distress goes beyond this approach. Artists should be aware of the limits of their role, training and personal capacity, and this includes monitoring the stress you may feel in witnessing these difficult emotions. This is a critical reason for working with partner organisations, co-facilitators and mental health practitioners, such as psychosocial workers and psychologists, so that artists can do the art and others can take responsibility for participant care. You should never do this work alone.

When you are working with a group and difficult emotions arise, there are a few ways you can help. Offering the kinds of support suggested below can help when you are directly interacting with someone in the moment. Beyond this, it's best to bring in those who are more skilled and to signpost to organisations that can offer deeper support.

Emotional support for you and your participants should be the responsibility of the partner organisations you work with. Work with them to have a list of mental health practitioners, such as psychologists and psychosocial workers, for referral purposes and have these resources at hand to share with participants if a more significant need arises. Some community partners may not have worked with artists before and may not realise the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of the work. Share this guide with them. These issues are discussed further in Module 6. If you are organising something with other artists, make sure you bring in someone with mental health or humanitarian psychosocial support experience into the project.

Identifying and Managing Signs of Stress or Difficult Emotions in Groups

Identifying the Signs

During your activity, you may notice some of these signs that participants are struggling with their emotions. The participant may be noticeably upset, crying, or shaking. The signs could be more subtle, such as not interacting with you or others, not making eye contact, holding themselves tightly, or withdrawing from the activity. It's important to know that experiencing positive emotions during an arts or creative activity can also be challenging. If these good feelings remind them of positive experiences from the past, they may also feel sad if it reminds them of loss.

Managing Participant Emotions While Facilitating

You can try some of these approaches:

- Acknowledge and normalise emotions ('I hear you're feeling scared - many people who have gone through this are feeling the same way.')
- Reframe or transform emotions ('Is there another way to think about this? Is there a way to put this into the art you are making?')
- Use open-ended questions ('What do you think about...?') This buys time for you to think of your next action, tosses the ball back to them, and encourages collaboration.
- Refocus their attention on the activity and offer reassurance (I hear that you

are struggling with that feeling right now. You're going to be OK. It might help for you to focus on the colours you are using in this drawing. What else would you like to add?)

- Invite grounding and self-regulation through simple physical actions ('Would it help to take a deep breaths together?' or 'Let's take a moment to stretch or sip some water.') Gentle movement, hydration, or breathing together can support nervous system regulation and help re-establish a sense of safety and control.

Co-regulation to Manage Challenging Situations

Artists and support people can also be impacted by the emotions of their participants. In the moment you can take a co-regulation approach that uses your calm, centering demeanor to help the other person respond in the same way. This can include:

- Not focusing on the distressing or challenging behaviour of a participant. While remaining observant and supportive, continue with the planned activities to maintain a calm and steady environment. If the behavior begins to affect others, a co-facilitator can gently invite the participant to step aside for a private and supportive conversation.
- Maintaining a soft, steady tone of voice and speaking slowly to invite calm.
- Using relaxed, open body language—e.g., uncrossing arms, gentle eye contact, and sitting at eye level.
- Mirroring slow breathing—invite one or two deep breaths together
- Offering a simple grounding activity, like gently tapping a rhythm on the floor, sipping water, or placing both feet firmly on the ground.
- Redirecting attention to the present moment through sensory cues (e.g., "Can you notice three things you see?" or "What do you hear right now?").
- Pausing with them without pressure to speak, allowing silence and space for regulation.
- Naming and normalizing emotions (e.g., "It's okay to feel overwhelmed. You're not alone.").
- Minimizing environmental triggers, such as loud noises or crowded areas, by gently suggesting a quieter space.

Supporting People Who Are Experiencing Stress

After the activity, or during a period of quiet creative engagement or conversation, a participant may engage you in conversation about their feelings. The supportive communication skills described in Module 3 may be enough to help someone feel better. If a person requires more support, the following may help them cope when they are on their own:

First encourage the person to think of something they like to do to feel better. People may already have things they do to help themselves in stressful situations. To help them draw on this knowledge, ask:

"What has helped you previously when you have felt this way?"

"What do you currently do to help yourself feel better?"

You can provide them with prompts if they struggle to think of something. For example:

"Are there any activities you used to enjoy doing that you could do?"

"Is there anyone who can help you?"

"Is there anyone you can speak to?"

If a person cannot think of anything they can do to help themselves, you can make suggestions like the ones in Box 13.

When offering supportive suggestions, it is essential to consider the humanitarian context and the severity of the crisis. Be thoughtful and aware that certain recommendations, such as going for a walk or joining social activities, may not be feasible due to security concerns or other constraints, for instance in crowded refugee camps. Ensure that any guidance is sensitive, realistic, and aligned with the lived experiences and existing conditions of the community.

When Someone is Experiencing Serious Distress

Signs of stress are natural and may fluctuate over time. When affected by a significant crisis, some people have longer-lasting and more intense reactions. When this happens, they might become seriously distressed. Feeling serious distress is a normal reaction to extraordinary circumstances, but it can stop people from being able to function. Signs that someone is experiencing serious distress include:

- Feeling disoriented or "unreal" in one's self or in the surrounding environment
- Having intrusive thoughts
- Becoming unusually upset over small things
- Being very withdrawn, avoiding people or activities
- Being very anxious and fearful, constantly on guard
- Shaking
- Crying
- Being angry
- Shouting
- Not knowing their name
- So upset they cannot take care of themselves or others
- Threatening to hurt themselves or others

In a situation like this, you will need to refer the person on to specialized support.

Box 10: Calming creative activities you can do with participants

Here are some examples of arts and other activities that might be calming in the moment/reduce stress:

- *Mandala colouring*
- *Crumpled paper colouring*[24]
- *Writing down the words to a favourite song*
- *Dancing to an upbeat song*
- *Singing or dancing with others in a circle*

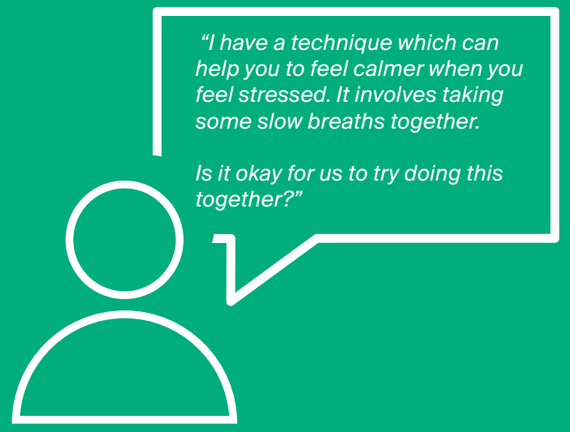
Box 11: Things that a person can do on their own when feeling stressed

- *Speak to a friend or family member*
- *Make a list of all the things you are grateful for (in your head or on paper)*
- *Find time to do an activity you enjoy, such as a hobby, every day)*
- *Exercise, walk or dance*
- *Do something creative, such as art, singing, crafts or writing*
- *Listen to music that changes your mood*
- *Read a book or listen to an audiobook*

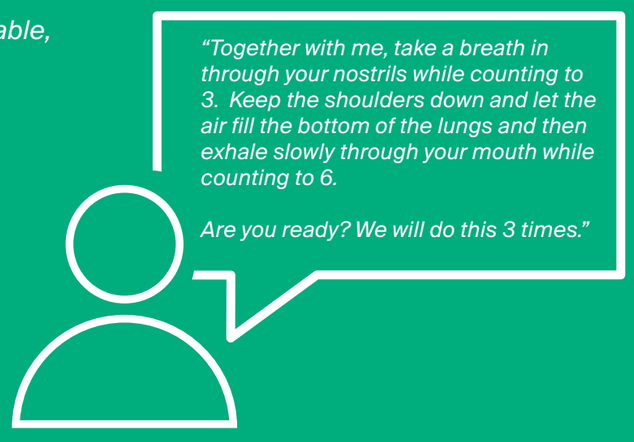
Box 12: Slow Breathing

If a participant appears anxious or stressed (or you are feeling this way), slow breathing may help.

Say:



If the person is agreeable, then continue:



This strategy may not help everyone, and if the person feels uncomfortable then stop the exercise.

What To Do When You Encounter Someone in Serious Distress

Ideally, it is a good practice to have one or more co-facilitators support people, such as psychosocial workers, psychologists, who can take over when a situation like this arises. These are steps you can take as needed:

1. **Safety first!**
   Make sure that you, the person and others are safe from harm. If you feel unsafe, have someone get help while you care for the person and hold the group. If you think the person may hurt themselves, get help (ask a colleague, call emergency services, etc.). Do not put yourself at risk.

2. **Your name and role**
   Reassure them that you are there to help. Ask them for their name so that you can address them.

3. **Keep calm**
   Don't shout at the person or physically restrain them.

4. **Listen**
   Use your communication skills, as described in Module 3, but do not pressure the person to talk. Be patient and remind them that you are there to help and to listen.

5. **Practical comfort and information**
   If possible, offer the person a quiet place to talk, a non-alcoholic drink, or a blanket. These gestures of comfort will help them feel safe. Ask them what they need – don't assume that you know.

6. **Help people regain control**
   a. If the person is anxious, support them to breathe slowly. See "slow breathing" technique in Box 14.
   b. If the person is out of touch with their surroundings, remind them where they are, the day of the week, and who you are. Ask them to notice things in their immediate environment (e.g. "Name three things you see, hear, smell or feel").

7. **Provide clear information**
   Give reliable information to help the person understand the situation and what help is available. Make sure that you use words they can understand (not complicated words). Keep the message simple and repeat it or write it down if needed. Ask them if they understand or have any questions.

8. **Stay with the person**
   Try not to leave the person alone. If you or a support worker can't stay with them, find a safe person (a colleague, a friend) to be with them until you find help or they feel calmer.

9. **Refer to specialized support**
   Do not go beyond the limits of what you know. Let others with more specialized skills, such as doctors, nurses, or mental health professionals, take over. Link the person directly with support or make sure that they have contact information and clear instructions for getting further help. If you are talking on the phone, try to stay on the line with the person until they calm down and/or you are able to contact emergency services to go and help directly. Check that they are comfortable and able to talk.

Additionally, it's advised that artists who work in humanitarian settings and provide activities for affected communities are trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA).[25]

Impact of Managing Emotions on You, the Artist

Keep in mind that witnessing and managing the challenging emotions experienced by others can have an impact on you. It is tempting to think that offering an artistic experience of creative activity will be a joyful and positive experience for everyone.

But context matters. Situations in humanitarian crisis and post-crisis contexts are incredibly difficult for everyone affected, and your experience of the crisis-direct (first-person) and indirect the stories of others)– can take a cumulative toll on you and your team.

We'll discuss additional strategies for self-care and organisational support in Modules 5 and 6.

Picture of Art workshop from Healing Arts project, Duhok, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Case Story

Connecting Through Poetry

Author: Sonya Armaghanyan / IOM Somalia

Location: Kismayo and Baidoa, Somalia

In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Somalia, in collaboration with local community-based organizations (CBOs) and Somali poets, launched a series of poetry workshops for conflict-affected people in the cities of Kismayo and Baidoa.[26] Rooted in Somalia's rich oral traditions, the initiative recognized the central role of poetry in Somali culture—not just as an art form, but as a vital means of community dialogue and social connection.

The initial workshops, held during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, were intentionally small—limited to 10 participants per session—and complied with local and international health protocols.

Despite these constraints, the project steadily gained momentum. By 2021, and especially throughout 2022, participation grew significantly, and the workshops expanded to include public poetry performances, allowing participants to share their original poems with their communities.

Somalis are often referred to as a nation of poets. Poetry in Somalia is deeply woven into daily life—from pastoral work and seafaring to family life, religious rituals, political discourse, and the processing of trauma. It is both personal and collective, artistic and practical. The workshops encouraged participants to explore complex emotions and social themes such as identity, belonging, empathy, understanding, trust, forgiveness, and peace. Led by local poets and CBO staff trained by IOM in psychosocially safe arts-based and storytelling methodologies, the sessions provided a secure and culturally familiar space for emotional expression. IOM's local staff, consisting of trained social workers, worked alongside community facilitators to offer one-on-one counseling when needed. This holistic approach ensured that participants could process their experiences both collectively and individually—with deeper reflection and support where necessary.

The workshops helped participants articulate both individual and collective identities, which are crucial to psychosocial well-being and social reintegration. Through storytelling games and poem composition, they reflected on their past, present, and future in empowering ways while strengthening social connection.

In one creative exercise designed to facilitate the poem composition process, participants drew images representing "trust" and "belonging." This activity encouraged metaphorical thinking and emotional

"I drew people crossing the river using a rope. This image symbolizes collective trust. The people trust each other, and they trust the rope to get them safely across."

expression. After sharing their drawings with the group, participants explained the meanings behind their images. One participant, who drew a group of people crossing a river with the help of a rope, explained: "*I drew people crossing the river using a rope. This image symbolizes collective trust. The people trust each other, and they trust the rope to get them safely across.*"

Ultimately, the poetry project fostered emotional resilience and strengthened community ties. By blending traditional Somali poetic practices with psychosocially appropriate arts-based approaches, IOM and its partners created a culturally resonant space where people could reconnect with their heritage, share their stories, and rebuild social connections. The workshops and public performances offered a platform for dialogue between conflict-affected individuals and community members from diverse backgrounds.

As one participant reflected: "*When two communities fight with one another, buraanbur [poetry traditionally composed by women] is recited as a message for reconciliation and encourages to bring two fighting communities together. In such scenarios, the women are given a role to spread messages of peace through buraanbur. We are contributing to the healing of the wounds of the affected community members.*"

Module 5: Self-Care for Artists

In times of crisis, participating in arts or creative activities can give people a sense of calm, escape, connection, and joy. It can also evoke feelings of powerful feelings of sadness, anger or distress. You have an important role as an artist in these situations. Caring for others through your arts practice can make a real difference in the wellbeing of communities.

You will share many positive emotions with your participants but may also be affected by challenging emotions that can be released through the artmaking process. Offering arts activities in times of crisis can be uplifting and rewarding work but also very demanding, physically and emotionally. Additionally, the humanitarian contexts you're working in may pose many new demands that you're not used to. You may:

- Be working without adequate physical or financial resources or protection
- Be confronted with illness, suffering or death
- Fear for your own and loved ones' safety and well-being
- Find that the experiences or stories you hear are challenging to hold in the moment and may remain with you after the project has ended.

You may also feel uncertain about the extent of your role and responsibilities to care for others and attend to their physical and emotional safety while engaging in your activities (see Module 4). If you are a volunteer from the community, you may not have enough institutional or financial support and also be concerned about your own circumstances (see Module 6).

Many people will feel stressed and exhausted while working in humanitarian settings. This is natural given the difficult demands. Everyone reacts differently to stress. You may experience some of the following:

- **Physical symptoms:** headaches, difficulty sleeping and eating.
- **Behavioural symptoms:** low motivation to work, increased use of alcohol or drugs, disengaging from religious/spiritual practices.
- **Emotional symptoms:** fear, sadness, anger.

While your past experiences with crises can inform and enrich your approach, your personal story should never become the central focus of your project activities delivery. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize your emotional responsibilities: your role involves delivering the project activities and providing support in the moment, but you are not accountable for participants' individual outcomes. Be prepared to refer participants to professionals with appropriate expertise, and avoid carrying the emotional weight of participants' experiences home with you.

If you are feeling powerless to help others, it can be helpful to identify those problems you can do something about and those you cannot. Forgive and be gentle with yourself if you are unable to help in a particular situation. Looking after yourself is not a luxury, it is essential to your health and wellbeing and to the safety of those you're working with. This starts from the earliest stages of preparing for your work and continues after the engagement is over.

The Impact of Witnessing Traumatic Experiences

If stress is consistently stopping you from doing your daily activities or you are experiencing some of the signs of serious distress listed in Module 4, you may be suffering from secondary or vicarious trauma. This can happen when someone is in a helping role with people who have experienced harm or terrible loss and are personally affected by the stories and experiences of others. Related to your role as an artist in crisis setting, you may also be:

- Feeling emotionally numb, disconnected, or unable to empathize
- Experiencing feelings of chronic exhaustion and physical ailments
- Regularly feeling angry and/or cynical about your work and those you're working with
- Feeling inadequate in your work and questioning whether what you do matters.

The sections below describe preparatory and self-care practices and the role of partner organisation support.

Self-Care and Reflective Practice

All of the previous modules describe practices you can also use to help keep you emotionally and physically healthy as you prepare for and conduct your work as an artist in humanitarian contexts. Another common artist strategy is having reflective practice, where you take time to mentally prepare for and process what is happening in your work.

What are some of the basics of self-care in humanitarian contexts? There will be many things you cannot control, but you can do some simple things to protect your health and wellbeing on a daily basis. It's easy to believe the needs of those directly affected by a crisis are more important than yours. You must regularly attend to your own needs in order to be a help to others. Each day, try to act on some of the suggestions below to help you manage your stress. Choose those that work best for you personally. If you do not manage to do this one day, be kind to yourself and try again the next day (Box 13).

Critical Role of Partner Organisation Support

As emphasized throughout previous modules, it is important to understand the scope and the boundaries of your role as an artist, and to be able to rely on the support of the partner organisations involved. Refer to the guidance in Module 6 to understand the responsibilities the partner organisations should hold in supporting both your role as an artist and the psychosocial needs of the participants you engage with.

Box 13: The 7 core principles of trauma informed care

1. **Gain Contextual Awareness:**

   Develop a clear understanding of the crisis context, including its origins, unfolding events, key stakeholders, risks involved, and recommended safety protocols.

2. **Maintain Personal Wellbeing:**

   Prioritize physical health through regular nutritious meals, sufficient sleep, daily physical activities like walking or exercise, and maintaining consistent daily routines.

3. **Foster Emotional Balance:**

   Engage daily in enjoyable or meaningful activities such as creative arts, reading, meditation, or prayer. Experiment with relaxation techniques like slow breathing, stretching, yoga, dancing, or progressive muscle relaxation to identify practices that help you unwind.

4. **Communicate Regularly:**

   Set aside some time each day to talk openly about your feelings with a trusted person such as a friend, family member, or colleague. If working in a team or organization, schedule regular check-ins and debriefs with supervisors or peers before and after workshops or sessions.

5. **Monitor Substance Use Mindfully:**

   Be aware of your consumption of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, or nicotine. Recognize that while these substances might offer temporary relief, they can exacerbate anxiety, mood swings, and sleep disturbances over time. Reduce availability of such substances and replace them with healthier stress-management strategies.

6. **Focus on your circle of control:**

   Draw a circle on a piece of paper. Inside the circle is what you can control. Focus on, write, or draw what you have control over such as the structure of your work, how present your artistic activity is, the boundaries that you set, how you respond to others, and how you practice self-care. Outside this circle are things you cannot control, such as the overall crisis circumstances, government responses, actions of others, unknown risks, and how participants ultimately respond.

7. **Reflect with Gratitude:**

   Conclude each day by acknowledging and appreciating your positive contributions and experiences, such as recognizing meaningful impacts on others or expressing gratitude for received support.

An Image of a Painting, Duhok, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Case Study

Creating Safe Spaces in Crisis Contexts: How RED NOSES International Supports its Emergency Smile Clown Artists

Author: Chiara Manavella and Silvia De Faveri
Location: Global focus with an experience from Ukraine

Context of Emergency Smile

In 2013, RED NOSES International (RNI) launched Emergency Smile, a crisis-response programme designed to bring emotional relief to communities affected by displacement and conflict. Over the past eleven years, the programme has carried out missions in countries such as Greece, Ukraine, Türkiye, Bulgaria, Mozambique, and South Sudan. Using the art of clowning, our professionally trained artists foster human connection even in the most challenging contexts.

Each mission team is composed of three clowns from RED NOSES' 11 partner organisations and one Head of Mission (HoM). Thanks to our humanitarian partners on the ground, these teams engage with communities through a variety of formats: clown shows, musical parades, circus activities with children and families, and humour relief workshops for aid workers.

Clowning transcends language and social hierarchy, creating a sense of safety and openness. In these moments of connection, people often feel encouraged to share personal stories — a dynamic that can offer valuable insight to field partners. But this proximity to trauma also affects the wellbeing of our artists and HoMs.

Challenges Faced by Team Members

Emergency Smile teams operate in emotionally intense and logistically unpredictable environments. They hear daily accounts of loss and resilience while navigating unfamiliar settings, often far from their own support systems. This exposure can lead to stress, fatigue, and vicarious trauma, the effects of which may linger long after the mission ends. We see it as our responsibility to support our team members just as thoughtfully as we support the communities they serve. Thus it became clear to us that psychosocial preparation, emotional safety, and trauma-informed care must be integral parts of our programming.

Our Approach — Before, During, and After Missions

Here are some of the key activities we regularly provide for our artists.

Before the Mission

- Check-in calls: Every team member has a one-on-one conversation with a coordinator to assess emotional readiness, discuss expectations, and identify any concerns or vulnerabilities.
- Pre-departure supervision: Teams take part in a session with a therapist specialised in trauma. These sessions, online or in-person, help build team cohesion, outline emotional safety strategies, and set shared expectations.

During the Mission

- Daily debriefings: Each day ends with a reflective team meeting. The first part focuses on emotional processing; the second part covers planning for the next day.

Voices from the Field: Clowning in Ukraine

Anamarija Jurišić Osmeričić, a healthcare clown, reflects on her experience during a 2025 scouting mission to Ukraine (Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk), where the Emergency Smile team worked with children in orphanages and hospitals, as well as with internally displaced families in community centres:

"I took time to consider whether I was ready to work in an active war zone. During the mission, I felt surprisingly well — supported by colleagues, and uplifted by shared moments of laughter between activities. But once home, I realized loud noises had become triggering. In therapy, I discovered that my body had internalised part of the experience. I shared this with my teammates in a follow-up meeting, in case it might help others. Sometimes, just knowing what to expect can make us feel more at ease."

- Crisis support: If needed, individual or group therapy sessions are arranged immediately— onsite or remotely— to address acute challenges.

After the Mission

- Final debriefing: Once the mission is over, the teams discuss perceived impact, group dynamics, and lessons learned to benefit future missions.

- Post-mission supervision: Artists are offered individual therapy (in their native language if needed), fully funded by RNI.

Ongoing Education

All team members receive training in trauma awareness, emotional self-regulation, and recognizing stress responses in themselves and others. These workshops equip artists with tools to stay grounded and resilient throughout the mission.

Unlocking the Power of Humour

Clowning is often as healing for the artists as it is for the communities. Shared laughter, playfulness, and music not only foster connection with others but also nurture bonds within the team. These joyful moments act as a counterbalance to the emotional weight of the work.

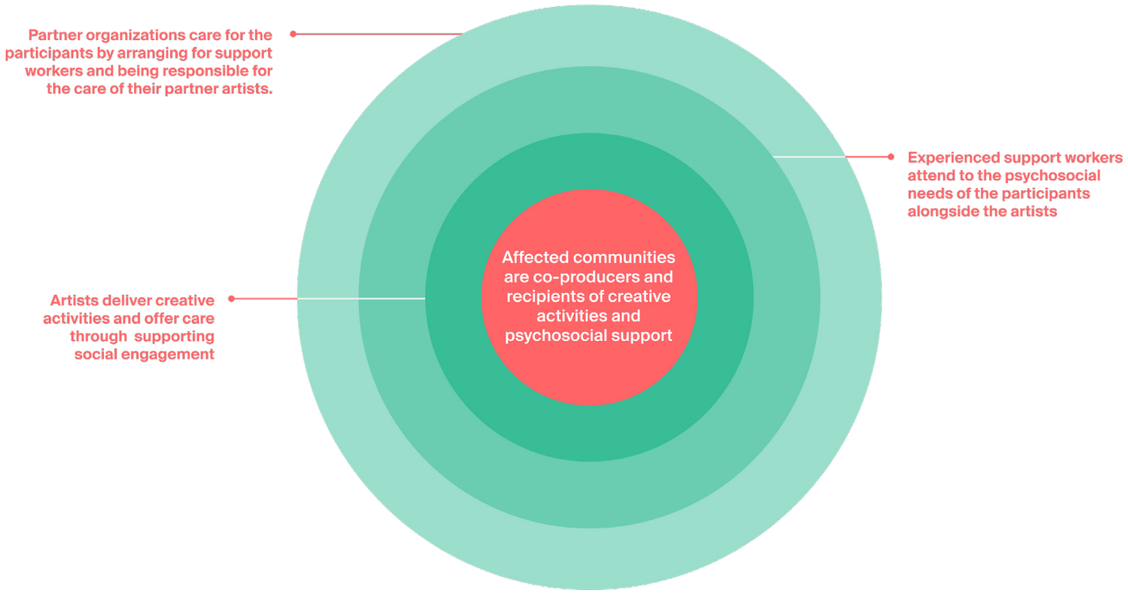
At RED NOSES International, we understand that art in crisis reaches outward, but it also reaches inward. By embedding psychosocial care into every phase of Emergency Smile, we honour the dual impact of our work — on the people we serve and the artists who serve them.

Children affected by the earthquake participate to an interactive Clown Show. RED NOSES Emergency Smile Programme, Amizmiz area, Morocco (2024). © REDNOSES – Photo by Craig Russell.

Module 6: Guidance for Organizations that Work with Artists

Engaging artists to offer creative activities or performances can offer a unique, accessible, and supportive experience for communities experiencing a crisis. It can provide a needed positive respite from the stress of the moment, including for your organisation's staff. However, artists working with complex conditions or in challenging settings can be impacted by their work and need psychosocial support themselves to ensure their safety and that of their participants.[27]

Figure 4: Ecosystem of Care



You can work with artists in many different ways: on a one-time basis or as part of a larger ongoing project. Some may have experience working with crisis-affected populations in humanitarian settings but many will not. All artists need support and supervision before, during, and after their engagement with participants, and all need co-facilitators and support workers to assist with the psychosocial needs of the participants. (Box 16)

It is also helpful to think about the ecosystem of care that is necessary when using the arts and creative activities to support communities affected by crises. (Figure 4)

The sections below address how to engage the artist and what structures are necessary to ensure a supportive working environment and fulfil your duty of care to the artists and the participants.

Engaging the artist

For many artists, performing or delivering creative activities is their job. If they are local to the crisis situation, they may have lost the opportunity for paying work like many others. Unless an artist or creative practitioner has explicitly volunteered, they should be paid for their work, with specific contracts that outline their role, the expectations of the activity, and organisational support. Like others in a crisis situation, they may be concerned about their basic needs, like food, water and shelter. To the extent possible, these issues should be discussed and monitored with them, and your assistance can be critical to their effective participation.

You should provide the artist with as much information as possible in advance about the situation and the intended audience so you can decide together whether they have the skills and personal capacity to take on this work.

Defining the scope of the engagement should be done together with the artist and with representatives of the community being served. The activity should consider the skills and experience of the artist, the cultural interests of the community, and the ability of the organization to provide a performance or activity space that is safe and appropriate to the activity.

Structure and Shared Understanding of Expectations

For artists working in an emergency context, it is essential to their safety and mental health to have the support of people, guidelines, and organisational resources.
This is especially true for artists who may not usually work in humanitarian and crisis situations.

It is important to remember that artists are typically trained as artists. Some may be community creative practitioners who have other professional skills. Regardless, unless they have specific additional training, they are not necessarily prepared to provide psychosocial support to those they are working with. For their own emotional safety, and to better understand the complexity of crisis situations, they should acquire basic training such as Psychological First Aid[28] or another short psychoeducational course, such as trauma-informed training, adapted for crisis situations. However, it must be clear that providing the artistic services is their main focus and they should be accompanied by other trained staff or volunteers who can attend to the emotional support needs of the audience. An artist should never be sent alone to deliver their work and they should work with a co-facilitator and skilled support workers.

Experienced humanitarian agencies have developed guidance on how to support community workers, which can include artists, working in humanitarian contexts. Drawing on this, organisations partnering with artists should aim to support them in the following ways:

- Ensure the artist understands the partner's organisational structure, how they fit into it, and who they contact in urgent situations.

- Ensure the artist is thoroughly informed about the community they plan to work with and support them in building trust with the affected community to facilitate effective initiatives.

- Designate a contact person or manager who takes responsibility for checking in with the artist regularly, debriefing after sessions, and organising psychosocial support as needed.

- Include the artist in regular briefings about the ongoing humanitarian situation.

- Make the artist part of the larger team and offer a buddy system to support and mentor them as needed during the engagement.

- Offer situational and psychosocial training that is made available to other staff.

- Provide handouts with self-care tips, resources, and key contacts for additional support (for both artists and participants in their activities).

- Encourage and monitor a reasonable working schedule that includes time for breaks and self-care.

- Offer psychosocial support during and after the engagement, which could include access to psychological supervision and debriefing.

- Publicly recognize their contributions and successes.

We recognise that in crisis situations, some community partner organizations may be new to operating in a humanitarian capacity and may not have time or resources to provide this kind of support. It may be possible to join with other community groups, governmental agencies, educational institutions, or professional humanitarian organisations to collectively offer this critical support to all staff and volunteers.

Collaboration is not always smooth, but it can facilitate critical access, support, and knowledge, especially for artists engaging in peer support and referral refugee spaces. In turn, arts practitioners can enrich the programming and practices of humanitarian aid staff, providing new tools, frameworks, and modalities to support the wellness of refugee communities.

Considerations Adapted for Artists Before, During, and After a Humanitarian Crisis[29]

BEFORE

The primary intervention consists of good, solid information about the tasks at hand, about stress and how to cope with emotional reactions to difficult situations. Such information prepares artists and other helpers to detect their own reactions and offers options for self care and peer support. Additionally, information about the unfolding humanitarian crisis can support the artists to adjust their expectations and feel more informed when engaging with affected communities. Provision of additional training and tools, such as PFA, can be helpful to artists' preparedness.

DURING

It is important to remember that the needs of artists and other helpers are often similar to the needs of those they are supporting. They too benefit from support that reduces the likelihood of developing stress-related problems. A supportive environment is one of the many crucial factors in minimizing stress.

AFTER

Artists and other helpers need appraisal of their work and signs from others that they and their work have been valued. Reflecting together with a supervisor or peers after the response can help artists and other helpers to understand and come to terms with their experiences. In addition, it may take some time for artists, volunteers and staff to process what they have seen and heard during the crisis, including what they were and were not able to do for others. It is helpful to follow-up with artists and other helpers over time to assess their needs for support.

Quick Tips for Agencies to Support Artists Before, During and After a Humanitarian Crisis

BEFORE

Inform & Prepare

Before a crisis happens or before the volunteer is sent to help:

- *Recruitment and selection*
- *Orientation*
- *Briefing and training*
- *Contingency planning*

DURING

Monitor & Support

During active response to a single event or prolonged crisis:

- *Team meetings*
- *Monitoring individual and team stress*
- *Supervision and additional training*
- *Peer support and specialist referral, as needed*

AFTER

Reflect & Refer

After the crisis is over, or when the artists and helpers end their work:

- *Team and individual reflection, including lessons learned and best practices*
- *Appreciation of artists and helpers*
- *Peer support and referral*

Case Study

The Campfire Project

Author: Jessica Hecht and Alexandra Zaslav

Location: Global focus with an experience from Palorinya Refugee Settlement, Uganda

The Campfire Project was founded during the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis, in 2017, to promote arts-based wellness in refugee spaces and among displaced communities.

Campfire's programming is developed and co-led by mental health professionals, arts therapists, and teaching artists, engaging diverse arts practices- dance, music, art, drama, writing, and stilt-walking- to empower refugees and asylum seekers to explore their creativity, refocus on their humanity, and foster their resilience.

The Campfire Project has led missions in refugee camps serving displaced communities from across the globe, including five trips to Greece, two to Moldova, and one to Uganda, as well as year-round programming for asylum seekers in the New York City area.

Collaboration

Campfire's work is grounded in a collaborative approach. When we go out to the field, we partner with a hosting humanitarian aid organization and their local staff on site. In this way, we enter into a context where:

A. The partner is already embedded into the coordinated humanitarian aid response.

B. The partner has already established relationships with the local community, enabling us to better map needs and attune our approach in advance, spread the word and launch recruitment efforts for the project pre-arrival, and hire local staff for the project (i.e. interpreters, local artists, etc.)

C. The partner can provide support on logistical needs as well as source any materials/products that can be procured locally

In turn, Campfire brings a team of experienced arts and mental health practitioners to provide:

1) a multi-week framework of therapeutic arts programming;

2) a culminating community-wide experience;

3) training to field workers in wellness-based arts programming and social and emotional learning that they can integrate into their work after our departure.

Palorinya Refugee Settlement

Campfire's mission to the Palorinya Refugee Settlement, in fall 2023, engaged over 500 refugees from South Sudan and the DRC, ranging from children to young adults.

With its open-door policy to refugees, Uganda hosts the highest number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Africa, with over 1.7 million displaced people. The Palorinya Refugee Settlement, located in Moyo district in the West Nile region, is home to approximately 125,000 of these displaced persons, largely from South Sudan and the DRC, as well as Sudan, Somalia, and Burundi.

Our Uganda mission derived from a partnership with the humanitarian aid organization, IsraAid. After a successful collaboration in Moldova, working with Ukrainian Refugees, IsraAid identified the Palorinya Settlement as especially attuned to our mutual goals of supporting children and youth impacted by displacement by providing psychosocial support and strengthening cohesion among and between communities in the camp.

However, one must also prepare to be unprepared. From our first day on site, we found that many expectations were misaligned, as we received three times the number of participants they told us to plan for, and we needed to quickly re-adjust our structure and programming goals. However, the biggest unexpected factor came halfway through our mission, when one member of our team tested positive for COVID-19. We immediately had to pause our programming, while we waited for more COVID tests to arrive from the capital, Kampala. In the end, only three of our team of twelve tested negative and were cleared to re-enter the camp.

One of our golden rules in the Campfire Project is to never promise something to participants that we can not follow through on. We told the participants all week that

The Palorinya Refugee Settlement is located in the Moyo District in the West Nile region of Uganda

7.35%

of Uganda's refugees live in the Palorinya Refugee Settlement

500+

refugees from South Sudan and the DRC engaged in Campfire's mission

they would get to share their work in a big community event. Campfire culminates all of our programming in a final shared experience - whether it is a full-scale performance or simply sharing a final project, this is an opportunity to ritualize a collective experience of joy and celebration.

The Role of a Culminating Shared Experience for Refugee Participants and Community and/or Audience members:

- Curate a symbolic platform for collective meaning making
- Create embodied experiences of transition and change
- Cultivate a sense of shared community, common culture, and solidarity
- Offer a space outside of ordinary routine, an opportunity to transcend the everyday, and invite imaginative capacities
- Create an opportunity to bear witness to each other's stories

This led to one of our biggest moments of disconnect with IsraAid, as they wanted to cancel the final community event, due to the lack of a full team of staff, and instead progress to working with a different, smaller group within the settlement. While we did work with more limited numbers the next few days, we did not let go of advocating for the culminating event. We stood our ground and made our case for following through on our commitment, maintaining our participants' trust, and ensuring they had a platform to share their creativity.
Eventually, we settled on an adapted version of the culminating show with our partner, who witnessed the power of this closing ritual, when they saw how it brought together the broader community in a moment of celebration.

The Campfire Project in Palorinya,Uganda (2023).
Courtesy of the Campfire Project.

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Image Credits

Cover Page: A participant in a Yazidi Cultural Archives art workshop, Kurdistan Region, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Page 6: Freedom painting, Lalish, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Amsha Ali and Yazda. Comment: “I painted this picture to express my joy when I escaped from ISIS to live freely. My dream was to become free and fulfill the dream, so I painted this painting.”

Page 14: Clown Me In. Sabine Choucair leads a clowning workshop at a refugee camp in Kahramanmaraş, Southern Turkey, as part of a Clown Me In and Clowns Without Borders Sweden initiative. (2023). Image courtesy of Evelina Rönnbäck.

Page 17: Participants in a Yazidi Cultural Archives photography workshop, Kurdistan Region, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Page 24-25: Tears of Hope painting, Duhok, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda Comment: “I drew this painting to express the sadness inside me and what happened to me while I was with ISIS and the circumstances I went through there.”

Page 32: Bettina Evans, Canterbury Earthquake Digital Archive, Ceismi, 2023.

Page 33: UN Women humanitarian work at Za’atari Refugee Camp, Jordan. (DATE) Photo: UN Women/Christopher Herwig.

Page 34: Visitors experience the UN Portal to a refugee camp in Jordan (2016). Image courtesy of UN Photo/Loey Felipe.

Page 43: Picture of Art workshop from Healing Arts project, Duhok, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Page 44: Young girls watch a football game during breaktime at a school run by Dr. Hawa, Afgoye corridor, Somalia (YEAR). Image courtesy of Tobin Jones. CC BY-SA 4.0

Page 49: An Image of a Painting, Duhok, Iraq (2022). Image courtesy of Yazda.

Page 50: Unaccompanied minors play during the Circus Smile workshop. RED NOSES Emergency Smile Programme, Lesvos, Greece, (2024). © RED-NOSES – Photo by Craig Russell.

Page 53: Children affected by the earthquake participate to an interactive Clown Show. RED NOSES Emergency Smile Programme, Amizmiz area, Morocco (2024). © REDNOSES – Photo by Craig Russell.

Page 60: The Campfire Project, Palorinya, Uganda (2023). Courtesy of the Campfire Project.

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This resource is the result of collaboration with 290 artists and researchers including six rounds of formal consultations and monthly calls with 18 collaborators from each WHO region including artists from the Anishinaabe and Oneida Nations and the Māori community. 272 people from 15 countries and 12 Indigenous Nations who identified themselves as artists, documentarians, arts therapists, public health practitioners, and researchers, participated in local consultation processes.

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Creative Care: A Resource for Artists Working in Humanitarian Contexts is a hands-on guide for artists responding to crisis. Drawing on global experience, it offers practical tools and strategies to harness creativity as a catalyst for healing, connection, and hope across diverse cultural settings.

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