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## Videoconference-based Creativity Workshops for mental health staff during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** COVID-19 presented significant challenges to psychiatric staff, while social distancing and remote working necessitated digital communications. NHS England prioritised staff wellbeing. Arts-based creativity interventions appear to improve psychological wellbeing, so this study evaluated online Creativity Workshops as a staff support response for COVID-19-related stress.

**Methods:** Participants were staff from a South London NHS psychiatric hospital. Group Creativity Workshops were facilitated via Microsoft Teams. Acceptability data on pre- and post-workshop mood and attitudes were self-reported by participants. Feasibility data were gathered from adherence to number of workshop components delivered.

**Results:** Eight workshops were delivered in May-September 2020 ( $N = 55$ ) with high adherence to components. Participants reported significantly increased positive mood and attitudes towards themselves and others; and decreased stress and anxiety.

**Conclusions:** Online Creativity Workshops appear feasible and acceptable in reducing stress in psychiatric staff. Integrating a programme of Creativity Workshops within healthcare staff support may benefit staff wellbeing.

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### KEYWORDS

Art; staff support; digital intervention; nursing; psychiatric services

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic placed greater pressure on healthcare staff, with high numbers reporting increased depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout symptoms (British Medical Association, 2020). Additional stressors for healthcare staff throughout the COVID-19 pandemic included increased exposure to COVID-19, shortages of resources, loss of access

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to places of recreation, and loss of social contact (Rajasekar & Danasekaran, 2020). Factors such as increased exposure to COVID-19, social isolation, and having to quarantine appear to have contributed to healthcare workers' risk of developing post-traumatic stress symptoms during the pandemic (Carmassi et al., 2020). Supporting the wellbeing of staff working in mental health settings is a requirement of the UK's National Health Service (NHS) psychology provision, and was critical to the COVID-19 public health response (Highfield et al., 2020; Riches et al., 2021).

Environments that facilitate creativity have been found to increase emotional intelligence, self-esteem, problem-solving, and resilience (Cameron et al., 2013). Creativity and arts-based interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and stress (Thomson et al., 2015); and increase happiness, relaxation, and energy, including in single sessions (Fancourt et al., 2016). Healthcare workers who attend cultural events or receive music therapy have shown improvements in wellbeing (Chen et al., 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2005). Research has demonstrated several benefits of creativity and arts-based interventions, such as visual arts activities, among healthcare workers, including reduced burnout, psychosocial stress, work-related stress, and anxiety, and increased wellbeing, resilience, and quality of life (Ho et al., 2021; Huet, 2015; Phillips & Becker, 2019). Such benefits have been found in a variety of healthcare contexts, such as nurses in hospitals (Hanson et al., 2017; Hsu et al., 2021; Repar & Patton, 2007), social workers in war situations (Huss et al., 2010), and end-of-life care workers (Potash et al., 2014). This suggests that arts-based creativity workshops may be an effective way of supporting mental health staff and improving their wellbeing; however, research is yet to explore this in acute and crisis psychiatric settings.

In this study, a programme of online arts-based creativity workshops was developed to provide increased support for staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme was funded by a Time to Smile grant from the Maudsley Charity in response to recognition that ward environments had limited staff interactions and a lack of meaningful activities (Evans et al., 2012). COVID-19 restrictions have necessitated remote working and reliance on innovative digital communications (Topol, 2019); and online support workshops have been shown to increase accessibility, facilitate an interactive environment, and provide social connectedness (Wiederhold, 2020).

## **Research approach and methodology**

This study aimed to evaluate acceptability and feasibility of novel videoconference-based Creativity Workshops to support psychiatric staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Design, participants & setting***

The study received ethical approval from the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. This study adopted a cross-sectional within-subjects pre-post-test design to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of the Creativity Workshops. Acceptability data on pre- and post-workshop mood and attitudes were self-reported by participants. Feasibility data were gathered from adherence to the number of workshop components delivered.

Participants were acute and crisis staff working in community and inpatient mental health settings at a South London psychiatric hospital. All participants gave informed consent to participate in the workshops and take part in the evaluation. Creativity Workshops were promoted by a clinical psychology service via Microsoft Teams to the acute and crisis staff. Microsoft Teams served as a communication tool for the live videoconference workshops, allowing document sharing and a chat function. Information about the Creativity Workshops was also shared with different staff groups such as occupational therapists, clinical teams, and medical staff via email lists and WhatsApp. During the initial stages of developing the project, one aim was to foster longer term collaborative relationships between arts organisations who had previously worked with the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and the acute clinical services. Facilitators were artists from organisations affiliated with the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust: the SHARP Gallery (three workshops), the Bethlem Gallery (one workshop), and the Arts Network (four workshops). The workshops were selected based on facilitators' availability, and the exercises within the workshops were selected by the facilitators who were independent of the evaluation and study. Each workshop involved an opportunity to discuss the creative process, to create something during the session, and to share these creations with the group.

### ***Procedure***

Eight 90-minute Creativity Workshops were delivered between May and September 2020, during the United Kingdom's first COVID-19 lockdown. These workshops included a variety of arts-based activities, including drawing images reflecting participants' states of mind, rearranging images based on the "rule of thirds", depicting texture through artwork and creating collages of these textures, drawing objects and reinterpreting them and applying this to paper sculptures, making storybooks based on a time when perspective had altered, making a Zine, discussing ideas for future generations using a playground of ideas, and doodling. See [Table 1](#) for descriptions of each workshop and the activities involved. Participants could join the workshops from any location, including from home or at work, using Microsoft Teams, and create and manipulate physical images, using paper, or digital images, on screens.

Participants were invited to complete optional, anonymous pre- and post-workshop surveys online via Qualtrics software. Pre-workshop, participants self-reported their demographic characteristics of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and working location ([Table 2](#)). A member of the project team took process notes during the workshops, including verbal feedback about the workshop.

Each workshop used the same format. Content varied by topic. The intended format comprised nine sections: setting up the workshop, welcome, guidelines and practicalities, introduction, presentation by guest facilitator, experiential time, group discussion time, survey completion time, and overall evaluation. Two observers attended and rated each session, using a checklist to score adherence to the intended format to assess feasibility.

**Table 1.** Full descriptions of the Creativity Workshops.

Workshop	Description
1. SHARP Gallery: Life as a mental health professional	The facilitator invited discussions about what participants had “seen differently” or “appreciated in a new way” since the pandemic lockdown. Participants independently drew an image reflecting their current state of mind. A joint drawing function allowed multiple participants to edit a single drawing online. Participants shared ideas and emotions experienced during their composition, and reactions to other participants’ work.
2. Arts Network: Story Illustration	The facilitator discussed “perspective” and the “rule of thirds”; breaking an image down into nine equal parts and aligning components of the image along these intersections to produce a balanced and aesthetic image. Participants were invited to come up with words related to a particular concept and draw images that related to these concepts onto a partitioned piece of paper. The group discussed how “narrative had developed” whilst drawing. Different interpretations of concepts were discussed.
3. Arts Network: Collage with Textures	The facilitator explained how texture can shape artwork, encouraging participants to think about how the duality of tactile touch and a visual experience of texture combine in artwork. Participants were invited to depict a range of textures on paper, taking inspiration from immediate surroundings and concepts. Participants discussed interpretations of texture and features, including “colour”, “feel”, “textural illusions”, and “artificial textures”. Participants cut their paper into pieces and arranged them into a pattern, creating a collage of their textures.
4. Bethlem Gallery: Constraints	The facilitator described how concepts such as “reimagining”, “changing”, and “distorting” allow exploration of artwork and life; “twisting and challenging” perceptions of how we view the world. The theme of “constraints” was introduced in the first task, which was to draw a particular set of objects and then reinterpret the instructions to create something else. Participants discussed feelings around this process. Reinforcing the importance of “play” throughout the tasks, participants produced paper sculptures, breaking down and reimagining them numerous times.
5. SHARP Gallery: Inspiration library	The facilitator drew this workshop from a project she had run at the Tate Modern in 2017, a collection of origami books filled with inspirational stories and pictures. The idea of conceptualising “maps” as a journey between two points, and how we can move between them, was discussed. Participants made a storybook, drawing from a time when perspective had altered, a change of heart had occurred, or inspiration had hit. The participants discussed how different perspectives can reveal different aspects of a person.
6. Arts Network: How to make a Zine	Participants were taught how to make a Zine, containing a character drawn from real-life or fictional settings. Participants created a backstory and description for their character, represented in a booklet. They shared their Zine and discussed the origins of their ideas.
7. SHARP Gallery: Ball Pit of Ideas	The facilitator filled a ball pit with annotated balls representing different ideas and thoughts for future generations. The activity consisted of finding an item and drawing on it in order to reflect the ideas surrounding planning for our future and what would be in our playground of ideas.
8. Arts Network: Doodle Art	The facilitator defined doodle art as “a drawing made while a person’s attention is otherwise occupied”. Participants were invited to fold paper into a booklet and doodle on one page without lifting the pen. Participants chose a shape to draw on the next page and doodle around it for 10 minutes. Participants drew a scene incorporating a real-life object. Participants doodled an object in their room without lifting the pen and then drew shapes around it. The group then reflected on the activity.

## Measures

### Acceptability

Pre-workshop, participants completed nine visual analogue scales (VAS) from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Very much”) adapted from previous research (Riches et al., 2018, 2019), asking how happy, stressed, and anxious they felt and the extent to which they felt “valued by others”, “they play a useful part in society”, “free to express their beliefs”, “they are

a person of worth”, “able to learn new skills”, and “they are a capable person”. These VAS were used as separate, individual items and were not totalled into subscales. [Table 3](#) displays full VAS items. The post-workshop survey included all the same VAS and six additional VAS measuring how “accessible” and “enjoyable” participants found the workshops, and the extent to which they “felt they learned from them”, were “able to use creativity”, and “felt included” during the workshop. [Table 3](#) displays full VAS items. There was a free textbox for qualitative feedback. This written feedback was pooled with any verbal feedback given during the workshops.

### ***Feasibility***

Two raters used a checklist to score adherence to the intended format. [Table 4](#) displays full items. One VAS from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Very much”), was used by two raters to measure the workshop sections overall (see [Table 4](#)). The number of attendees and the length of the workshop were recorded.

### ***Analysis***

To evaluate workshop acceptability, the VAS survey data were pooled for all workshops and mean pre-workshop and post-workshop scores were calculated for each item. Paired sample t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-workshop VAS scores using SPSS v26. Effect size was calculated using Cohen’s d. The aim of this analysis was to use the t-test as an indicator of acceptability and to rule out any adverse effects. Key themes were identified in the qualitative feedback and categorised by researchers into strengths and weaknesses of the workshops. Feasibility was analysed by reporting the percentage of checklist components delivered for the total number of sessions and VAS scores.

## **Results**

Overall, 55 participants attended the workshops and 45 provided feedback. [Table 2](#) reports their demographic characteristics. Thirty-six (80.0%) were female, 29 (64.4%) were of white ethnicity, the most common occupation was nursing (28.9%), and two-thirds of participants (66.7%) were working from home.

### ***Acceptability***

Post-workshop, paired sample t-tests showed there were significant increases in happiness (large effect), the extent to which the participants felt “valued by others”, “free to express their beliefs” and a “person of worth” (all medium effects), and the extent to which participants felt like a “capable person” and “able to learn new skills” (small effects). There were significant decreases in anxiety and stress (large effects). Changes in how useful people felt in society were not significant. See [Table 3](#) for inferential statistics. Post-workshop mean VAS scores were high ( $\geq 8.67$ ) for how accessible and enjoyable the workshops were, and the extent to which participants felt they learnt, were able to use creativity, and felt included during the workshop. Highest mean VAS scores were for how

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of participants who took part in the workshops ( $N = 45$ ).

Demographics	Frequency	
	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	9	20.0
Female	36	80.0
Ethnicity		
Asian	7	15.6
White	29	64.4
Black	0	0.0
Mixed	3	6.7
Other	6	13.3
Occupation		
Nurse	13	28.9
Occupational therapist	4	8.9
Healthcare assistant/support worker	2	4.4
Doctor	2	4.4
Psychologist	3	6.7
Activity Coordinator	1	2.2
Other	20	44.4
Working location		
Home	30	66.7
NHS building	12	26.7
Other	3	6.7

**Table 3.** Pre- and post-workshop measures of wellbeing.

Visual analogue scale	Before		After		Test	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect ( <i>d</i> )
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD				
How <b>happy</b> you currently feel	5.75	1.58	8.29	1.48	-7.36	44	0.001	1.66
How <b>stressed</b> you currently feel	5.84	2.28	3.11	2.55	5.01	44	0.001	1.13
How <b>anxious</b> you currently feel	5.63	2.40	3.02	2.37	5.14	44	0.001	1.09
The extent to which you feel <b>valued</b> by others	6.42	1.69	7.60	1.88	-2.93	44	0.005	0.66
The extent to which you feel <b>free</b> to express your beliefs	6.85	1.61	7.85	1.69	-2.80	44	0.008	0.61
The extent to which you feel you play a <b>useful</b> part in society	6.92	1.71	7.61	1.66	-1.91	44	0.063	0.41
The extent to which you feel you are a person of <b>worth</b>	7.22	1.69	8.00	1.45	-2.63	44	0.012	0.50
The extent to which you feel you are a <b>capable</b> person	7.37	1.44	8.00	1.45	-2.19	44	0.034	0.44
The extent to which you feel you are able to <b>learn</b> new skills	7.66	1.55	8.35	1.48	-1.44	44	0.019	0.46
How easy you found it to <b>access</b> this workshop	-	-	9.13	1.54	-	-	-	-
How much you <b>enjoyed</b> this workshop	-	-	9.16	1.45	-	-	-	-
To what extent you feel you have <b>learned</b> from this workshop	-	-	8.67	1.92	-	-	-	-
To what extent you were able to use <b>creativity</b> during the workshop	-	-	9.25	1.15	-	-	-	-
To what extent you felt <b>included</b> during the workshop	-	-	8.99	1.97	-	-	-	-

SD: standard deviation; Test: Paired-Samples T-Test; Visual analogue scales (VAS) were measured from 0 ("Not at all") to 10 ("Very much"). Tests were conducted on VAS that were collected before and after the workshops. The last five VAS were only collected after the workshops and so tests of difference were not applicable.

enjoyable and how creative the workshops were (both  $\geq 9.16$ ). Table 3 reports all mean VAS scores.

### Feasibility

The average length of the workshops was 81 minutes. Inter-rater agreement for workshop components delivered ranged between 89–100%. Overall, 119/133 (89%) of workshop

**Table 4.** Fidelity to workshop checklist items.

Checklist items	Overall (%)
<b>Setting up the workshop</b>	
The online room is accessible with clear instruction about how to join and navigate the space	100
Facilitators to make themselves available before and after the workshops to answer any questions	85.7
<b>Welcome</b>	
Greet participants as they enter the online room	85.7
Answer any initial questions or worries people may have	100
Participants are invited to complete pre-workshop surveys in an un-intrusive way	85.7
<b>Guidelines and Practicalities</b>	
Facilitators to discuss the ground rules including confidentiality and respect	42.9
<b>Introduction</b>	
Introduce the workshop	100
Facilitator to give brief information about the art form	100
<b>Presentation by guest facilitator</b>	
Facilitator to give a detailed talk about the art form and their personal involvement within the field	85.7
Facilitator provides an opportunity to ask questions and share experiences	85.7
Facilitator uses stimulus materials to make the learning engaging and creative	100
<b>Experiential time</b>	
Facilitator to bring a structured task appropriate for a wide range of people	85.7
Facilitator to aid people that need help or inspiration	100
People are engaged in the task for most of the time	85.7
There was adequate time for people to complete their task	100
<b>Group discussion time</b>	
Facilitator to encourage participants to ask questions regarding the workshop	85.7
Be aware of the successes within the group and share out appropriate praise or encouragement	100
<b>Evaluation time</b>	
Give participants enough time at the end of the session to fill in the post-workshop survey	100
Signpost participants to appropriate services or workshops they can join in the community	71.4
Agreement (%) between raters	94.6
Number of attendees	7.43
Length of session (mins)	81.0

**Table 5.** Visual analogue scale (VAS) scores on workshop checklist items.

Checklist section VAS items	Score
How <b>accommodating</b> was the setup?	8.93
How much did the <b>welcome</b> make participants <b>comfortable</b> ?	8.21
How <b>clearly</b> were the ground rules communicated?	8.50
How <b>inclusive</b> was the introduction?	8.86
How much did the facilitator's talk lead to <b>discussion</b> and <b>shared experiences</b> ?	8.07
How <b>engaging</b> was the task?	9.07
How effectively did the facilitator encourage <b>questions</b> and <b>engagement</b> ?	9.00
How well were the participants <b>supported</b> to complete the <b>survey</b> ?	8.79

components were delivered over seven workshops (one workshop was not rated). Ground rules were least likely to be delivered (42.9%). The online platform was rated as accessible and clear to access 100% of the time. [Table 4](#) displays all percentages of components completed. All VAS scores were high (all $\geq$ 8.07). Highest VAS scores were for task engagement and facilitator encouraging questions and engagement (both $\geq$ 9.00). [Table 5](#) displays all VAS scores.

### Qualitative feedback

Participants reported the workshops were “enjoyable”, a “good opportunity to relax”; they appreciated “seeing other people’s ideas and creativity” and they would not normally



have “taken the time” to “incorporate this” into their day. Participants reported it was a “great way to get people together”, and “express yourself and your feelings”; they felt “de-stressed”, “included, valued, and not judged” in a “comfortable and safe space”, and it provided an effective “distraction from other stressors”. Some participants reported feeling “nervous” prior to the workshops, found it “difficult to feel fully involved due to technical issues”, and reported that the need for “speaking one by one” on the video-conference format was detrimental to free-flowing conversation.

## Discussion

High VAS scores, positive qualitative feedback, and high completion rate of workshop components delivered indicate that the online Creativity Workshops were both acceptable and feasible for psychiatric staff. There was a significant positive change in happiness, stress, and anxiety post-workshop. Staff found the workshops helpful, enjoyable, accessible and it supported their emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative feedback indicated that the workshops were relaxing, comfortable, and allowed connection with others, although on occasion the online format hindered the involvement and conversation flow for a small minority of staff. The workshops were feasible to run online, in a 90-minute duration, and reached a wide range of NHS staff, the majority of whom were working from home. They appear to be feasible to run in psychiatric hospitals and may be especially useful during times of increased stress. These findings are consistent with past research indicating that arts-based interventions can help reduce burnout, work-related stress, and anxiety, and improve wellbeing, resilience, and quality of life among healthcare workers (Hanson et al., 2017; Ho et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2021; Huet, 2015; Phillips & Becker, 2019). Significant reduction in anxiety and increases in social inclusion scores are comparable with findings from similar arts-based workshops (Fancourt et al., 2016; Margrove, 2015).

Strengths of the study include the direct feedback from clinical staff, partnerships with external arts-based organisations, and the innovative videoconference-based delivery, which allowed greater accessibility, flexibility, social connection, and sharing of creative resources. The online workshops were low-cost and appeared to be feasible compared with face-to-face workshops as staff could access the training from various locations and a greater number of staff could attend, warranting further studies exploring the cost-effectiveness of online versus face-to-face workshops.

Limitations include lack of a control group, standardised measures, long-term follow-up, and sample diversity. It is unclear to what extent the benefits to staff were due to having a work break, respite, distraction, and engaging socially with others, rather than to the Creativity Workshop itself. A more comprehensive process evaluation might address some of these issues. The study only tested the short-term impact on staff, so any longer-term implications for mood and wellbeing cannot be discerned from this study. The convenience sampling in recruitment of the workshop facilitators and workshop content meant that there was limited standardisation across the sessions, which means that they cannot be easily compared. The measures were single item VAS, which limits comparisons with conventional, validated mental health measures. There were pragmatic challenges creating the online workshops using Microsoft Teams and a minority of participants found it difficult to engage with the online format, highlighting the need for improvements in

digital communication platforms within healthcare (Rooney, 2016; Schlieff et al., 2022). Although participants rated the online format as highly accessible, some struggled to stay for the duration or joined late, highlighting the heavy work demands on staff and the challenges of providing accessible support interventions for psychiatric staff. The time and duration of the workshops may not have been accessible to staff who were most busy, therefore future workshops could aim to provide brief and more varied time slots to increase accessibility and engagement for staff who would most likely benefit.

Arts-based creativity workshops have the potential to facilitate inclusivity and attract a diverse demographic (Griffiths, 2005). However, demographic data in this study indicates the workshops disproportionately reached people of white ethnicity and women, limiting the generalisability of the findings. People from minority ethnic groups are more likely to experience risk factors for mental health difficulties (Vines et al., 2017), therefore future staff support interventions should consider how they can be more accessible and culturally appropriate.

Research suggests barriers to staff engagement with psychological support in the NHS include difficulty of access to health and wellbeing services and lack of time, whereas creativity with resources involving external partnerships and organisations were markers of successful interventions (Quirk et al., 2018). Utilising creativity and novel videoconference technology has the potential to target staff who may be reluctant to engage in formal psychological interventions (Camic, 2008; Griffiths, 2005). Online Creativity Workshops could be offered as a drop-in, integrated into the staff support function and continue post-COVID-19 to increase accessibility and appeal to a range of staff.

Future research might evaluate arts-based creativity workshops with a control group, use standardised, validated measures, conduct a more comprehensive process evaluation, evaluate predictors of mood scores, and test a more diverse sample, which would improve the generalisability and validity of the findings and allow comparison with other research. Longer-term follow-ups, for example 3–12 months after the workshops, could be conducted to determine whether there are any sustained improvements in mood and wellbeing (Holt, 2020). Qualitative interviews with participants might also shed light on mechanisms underlying the effects of arts-based creativity workshops. Future research might also compare different types of workshops and the barriers and facilitators to engaging in them. This data could be used to refine the arts-based creativity interventions and proceed to an exploratory trial.

Service users on inpatient units report dissatisfaction with the non-therapeutic nature of ward environments, in particular limited staff interactions and lack of meaningful activities (Evans et al., 2012). This suggests a greater need for more structured, therapeutic activities on offer to service users (Hopkins et al., 2009) in collaboration with staff members, to help promote positive mental health recovery. Arts-based sessions in the community have proven to be an effective way of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing and can lead to improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence (Heenan, 2006). There is potential to investigate use of online workshops which are jointly delivered to staff and service users as an intervention across inpatient wards to improve staff and service user interactions by providing shared meaningful activities and genuine coproduction (Williams et al., 2022). The workshops could use art to offer both service users and staff an innovative and cathartic space to explore emotions and reflect on key mental health issues and potential coping strategies. Sessions could include a participatory

element which may support recovery in service users, specifically through enhancing connectedness and improving hope (Stickley et al., 2018). This may improve service users' wellbeing, especially as many positive psychology exercises have been shown to be feasible for people with severe mental health conditions (Riches et al., 2016; Schrank et al., 2016). Arts-based workshops may improve service user and staff wellbeing, reduce staff stress and fatigue, stimulate creativity, facilitate a sense of community in the work environment, and may lead to a reduction in violence and aggression on psychiatric wards (Hackett et al., 2020; Karpavičiūtė & Macijauskienė, 2016).

In conclusion, this study indicates that online Creativity Workshops are feasible and acceptable, and can provide crucial support to psychiatric staff working in challenging environments.

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## Data availability statement

Ethical approval did not permit sharing of participants' data.

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