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1. Introduction

Can libraries be therapeutic? The answer is yes! Stories have the ability to change us at the emotional, social, behavioural and psychological level. Bibliotherapy goes back to Ancient Greece where libraries were considered as healing places for the soul, while after the First World War traumatised soldiers returning home were often prescribed a course of reading. At the same time, science proves that stories have the ability to mobilise certain parts of our brains and bodies facilitating empathy, compassion, and collaboration.

Athens Comics Library and Refugee Week presents the preliminary findings of the pilot program Libraries on Prescription, a social prescribing program for people who need support with their mental health, are lonely or isolated, belong to minorities or vulnerable groups, have complex social needs that affect their well-being, or have mental disorders created by the agony and impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

On behalf of our team we would like to deeply thank our partners EPAPSY (Association for Regional Development and Mental Healthcare) for their scientific guidance, European Cultural Foundation and Democratic Society for their trust and support and the five libraries that share the same vision with us and joined us on this challenging and impactful journey.

Also, we deeply thank the individuals involved Haido Pantazi, Giannis Tsakonas, Zoi Hatzi and Aggeliki Fournari who worked so hard to deliver this pilot project within their Libraries and Communities.

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2. Social and Cultural Prescription

The World Health Organization approaches health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease. By extension, mental health is a form of well-being, in which everyone realises their potential to face the challenges and stressful situations of everyday life, can work productively and contribute to their community.

In the post-COVID19 era, the need to redesign the environments that affect the field of mental health and strengthen the corresponding systems that promote it is imperative. The pandemic leaves behind a series of negative effects on the individual and social psyche coming from social isolation, but also the anxiety we experienced in the face of the challenge of the global health crisis. At the same time, it intensified the gap and certain exclusions especially for groups that come from more vulnerable groups. For example, according to OECD research, refugee children who did not have access to distance learning implemented during the lockdowns showed increasing levels of stress, melancholy, and even depression.

In such a demanding environment and with the imperative for mental health services accessible to all, social prescribing can be an important tool in this direction. Social prescribing, often referred to as "community referral" is a way that allows health professionals to refer patients to a range of non-clinical services. Given that health and well-being are often significantly influenced by social, economic and environmental factors, social prescribing responds to the needs of individuals by taking a more holistic approach, while also aiming to support them to take better control of their personal health .

Social and cultural referral programs can help individuals build social connections and support networks, which are crucial for mental well-being. These programs often involve group activities, community engagement, and peer support, providing opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences or backgrounds. By fostering a sense of belonging and social integration, these referral programs can combat feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are known risk factors for mental health issues. The support and understanding gained from these connections can provide individuals with a valuable source of emotional support and contribute to their overall mental resilience.

Evidence for the effectiveness of such practices shows that they can and do have a positive impact on the lives and health of individuals and communities. For example, an evaluation of a



social prescribing program in the city of Bristol in 2010 found that it improved stress levels to a large extent. A similar program in Shropshire - which ran and was evaluated in 2017-2019 - found statistically significant improvements in levels of well-being and loneliness.

So how can culture fit into such a scheme of social prescription? Research shows that exposure to creative and cultural activities has a positive effect on the human brain. According to Art, Culture and the Brain (2022), participation in cultural activities is associated with well-being, a sense of cohesion and mobilisation, while the mental health of people living in developing areas can be improved through exposure to creative and artistic activities. The same research claims that this exposure can strengthen relationships between families and improve the daily lives of teenagers. Moreover, according to Katherine Cotter, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, "museums and art spaces have the potential to positively affect people, reducing stress, creating positive emotional experiences, and helping them feel less alone and more connected."

3. Libraries as a open, safe and brave spaces

Libraries have long been regarded as more than just repositories of books. They are open, safe, and brave community spaces that serve as pillars of education, enlightenment, and inclusivity. By providing a sanctuary for individuals of all backgrounds and fostering a sense of belonging, libraries play a vital role in creating a stronger, more connected community. Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, libraries provide equal access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities. They are places where individuals can freely explore a vast array of books.

In addition to being open, libraries are safe spaces. They provide a peaceful and secure environment where individuals can escape the stresses of daily life and find solace in the pages of a book or the quiet study spaces. Libraries promote a sense of safety by enforcing rules that prioritize respect, quietness, and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, libraries are brave spaces that encourage intellectual exploration, critical thinking, and freedom of expression. They are platforms for diverse ideas, opinions, and perspectives, fostering a climate of open dialogue and learning. Libraries host talks, book clubs, and community discussions, allowing individuals to engage in meaningful conversations and challenge their own beliefs. By embracing the bravery to question, explore, and discuss, libraries empower individuals to become informed and active members of their communities.



Libraries also act as catalysts for social change and inclusivity. They strive to represent the diverse voices within their community by curating collections that reflect different cultures, experiences, and viewpoints. Libraries often organize cultural events, workshops, and exhibitions that celebrate diversity and promote understanding. They are spaces where individuals can learn about, appreciate, and respect different backgrounds, fostering a sense of unity and empathy.

In conclusion, libraries are more than just buildings filled with books. They are open, safe, and brave community spaces that foster learning, inclusivity, and connection. Libraries provide equal access to knowledge, create a sense of safety and belonging, encourage intellectual exploration, and promote social change. As we embrace the digital age, it is crucial to recognize the enduring value of libraries as essential community resources that enrich lives, inspire minds, and strengthen the fabric of our society.

4. The Europe Challenge

The Europe Challenge was launched in 2020 by the European Cultural Foundation to offer support, resources and funding to libraries and communities – to help explore how people can meet, live together and work in the Europe of today. If we are to respond to challenges including war, polarisation, cultural and economic crises, the people of Europe must lead the way in solidarity. People need safe spaces where they can come together and build understanding leading to a stronger sense of solidarity. Libraries offer just that opportunity. As trusted democratic spaces that provide deep-rooted connections to communities, municipalities and local governments, libraries offer a safe space for people across Europe to come together with their neighbours and fellow citizens to identify common problems and find solutions.

The programme involves a series of inspiring online and face-to-face opportunities including:

- learning exchanges with other libraries and communities across Europe
- one-to-one online coaching in community engagement, collaborative design and innovation
- a set of downloadable tools
- funding opportunities to explore prototypes and solve challenges



5. Libraries on Prescription Programme

a. The challenge

Libraries should be acknowledged and celebrated as an essential part of community life, promoting independence and resilience, where the profile of local library users reflects the makeup of their community. Councils and other local authorities, including health services and PSS organisations, should consider libraries first when planning to provide access to a range of public information and services.

During a period of severe economic crisis in Greece, the two years of socio-economic crisis and austerity have caused high unemployment, increased homelessness, and significant social pressures on vulnerable groups. Changing demographics across Greece is affecting the city's cultural mix and identity, with 20,000 migrants and refugees living within the municipality of Athens.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the arts and cultural sector both in Athens and across Greece. The library and community sector has seen radical disruptions to many of its routines, funding sources and relationships. Yet, physical distancing has shown all of us how much we need and value connection, culture and libraries as places of sanctuary.

With the latest development in Ukraine, Europe's safety has been shaken, and citizens seek places to feel as sanctuary, where they can come together as communities and show solidarity and connection. At the same time, everyone can affirm that libraries constitute one of the most reliable means available to contemporary developed societies to overcome the crisis.

The current levels of psychosocial distress in society are significant, as evidenced by the number of prescribed antidepressants and the numbers of working days lost as a result of stress and anxiety. There is a growing body of evidence that active involvement in creative activities provides a wide range of benefits, including the promotion of well-being, quality of life, health and social capital. One of the most pressing public health concerns is mental illness, a condition that affects hundreds of millions of people globally. In fact, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives. That means 4 in 4 people are significantly and profoundly impacted directly or indirectly.

Whilst the current Covid-19 crisis has brought untold personal, social and economic tragedy, we also want to know how people's lifestyles have changed and what opportunities there might be for people-centred reinvention. People's wellbeing and mental health are being tested in ways



we couldn't have imagined. We need to prioritise our most vulnerable in society, as well as the key workers who are over-stretching themselves now for all of us.

The quality of the physical environment and connection to other people will be a big part of looking after our wellbeing. Those who have good access to the things they need nearby, quality green space and streets that are easy to walk and cycle on are feeling healthier, less stressed and appreciating the slower pace of life.

b. The pilot solution in Athens Comics Library

We believe that sharing our stories and experiences with mental health and illness is an important way of reducing stigma, raising mental health awareness, and building a sense of community. Libraries of Sanctuary is a network of librarians, library staff, community groups and book lovers who are raising awareness of the issues facing people suffering with mental health conditions, offering support and participation opportunities, and contributing to a culture of welcome in the wider community. Libraries of Sanctuary work closely with health and PSS professionals to offer an alternative towards wellbeing and mental health improvement.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines wellbeing as “a dynamic state of physical, mental and social wellness; a way of life which equips the individual to realise the full potential of his/her capabilities and to overcome and compensate for weakness.”

Social prescribing program for people who have long-term health problems, complex social needs, mental health challenges created by the agony and impact of the covid19 pandemic (long covid19, loss of family member, depression, anxiety) and/or socio-political environment (poverty, recession) as well as natural disasters (wildfires) and those who have suffered trauma(displacement, DV survivors). As we think about how to holistically support people's quality of life, research shows that engaging with the arts improves the wellbeing of people.

Benefits include:

- assisting older people to overcome social isolation by providing opportunities for friendship and support;
- improving mental wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem;
- helping people through periods of loss and bereavement;
- improvements in measures of physical health, such as functional ability, mobility and cardiovascular fitness, allowing people to undertake increased levels of general daily activity;
- skill development in the creative arts;



- enjoyment and pleasure.

Engaging with the arts as a creator as well as a participant, can empower people in a way that complements rehabilitation and wellness goals.

Through Libraries on Prescription, it is clear that the act of creating something tangible had a transformative effect on people. Whether through visual art, music, artistic movement, photography – all art forms provided people with tools to express emotion, experience or thought in a way that they may not have had access to before. The Libraries who facilitated spaces for Libraries on Prescription will help to give people these tools, partnering with them to bring the positive changes that they wanted to see in their own lives.

Why run a Libraries on Prescription (LoP) programme:

- Reach and support the whole community regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status or educational attainment.
- Create a Culture of Caring
- Provide space where groups can come together and enjoy activities that are co-designed with local people, to meet their needs.
- Offer local health support services available through 'community hubs', bringing together different partners' offerings in a seamless way.
- Create safe, welcoming and accessible physical and virtual environments freely open to all, which encourage participation, creativity and mutual learning and support.
- Help local government and its partners deliver their strategic objectives, whether linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing, economic growth, promoting independent living or increasing life chances.
- Capacity building for library staff and library service users

c. The Storytelling Methodology

Storytelling plays an important role in how one perceives oneself and defines one's personality. And by nature all people are storytellers, while the human brain is genetically programmed to record information better when it is part of a larger narrative context. At the same time, when we listen to a story our body secretes oxytocin, the hormone of joy and security.



Bibliotherapy goes back to Ancient Greece, where libraries were seen as places of healing for the soul, while after the First World War wounded soldiers returning home were prescribed a course of reading (Dovey, C., 2015)

And while Bibliotherapy is quite common, narrative counselling is relatively recent (made more popular in the 1990s by Michael White and David Epston. According to Corey and his book "Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy", "we live our lives through the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us. These stories construct reality, as do what we see, feel and do."

Stories can help one better organise one's memories around an important event and at the same time decode and subsequently manage it better. James Pennebaker in his book "Opening Up", writes, "just as we are captivated by good stories in literature or film, we need to construct interesting stories for ourselves. Good narratives help to better organise events that have stigmatised us. And once they are better organised, they suddenly become smaller and easier to manage." Another positive effect of narrative therapy is the process of externalising and becoming familiar with the language and words we use to describe ourselves or others. At the same time, healing through storytelling also comes from exploring the message of the story and the emotions they create in us.

All of the above can be developed in the natural space of stories, which is none other than libraries, which are gradually becoming more and more safe spaces where people can come together and interact. Libraries can create visibility for each of us and make us feel psychologically safe and that we belong to a community.

Stand Up Comedy in Athens Comics Library

The activity we designed for our pilot solution was a series of Stand Up Comedy workshops to a mixed group of people of different ages and from different backgrounds. The aim of the training was to shift the narrative about who and what can be funny, but at the same time to build self confidence, foster well-being and mostly to create a safe space of sharing personal stories, mutual listening and empathy.



Image by Dimitra Asimakopoulou

d. Mental Health Assessment and Data and Evaluation

This is an observational study, with a mixed methodology (mixed model). “[Mixed methods” is a research approach whereby researchers collect and analyse both quantitative and qualitative data within the same study (Bowers et al., 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Mixed methods research draws on potential strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods, (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989) allowing researchers to explore diverse perspectives and uncover relationships that exist between the intricate layers of our multifaceted research questions.

Participants were selected using a convenience methodology following a relevant invitation/posting on social media. Out of the total 21 persons that contacted our team to participate in the workshop, 7 were not available the dates and time proposed and as a result could not take part.

Nine out of the thirteen eligible participants attended the first workshop meeting.



The intervention consists of activities centred on stand-up comedy in a cycle of 12 weeks with an once per week frequency.

The pilot study sets out to assess whether levels of anxiety and depression as well as well-being were improved after participating in the workshops. The workshop was not intended to have the form of therapy sessions or to work at great depth.

Data were collected from participants from point of referral to post-participation feedback. At the point of contact for the follow up assessment, further consent was obtained.

Of the 10 original participants 6 agreed to participate in the follow up assessment. Furthermore, 2 participants did not agree to complete the questionnaires in the baseline.

The following data were collected:

- Sociodemographic (eg, age, gender, occupational status,) and clinical characteristics (eg, reasons for referral).
- Anxiety levels: Anxiety was measured using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), which is validated for use in general and clinical populations (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Löwe, 2006) and translated and validated in Greek (Vogazianos et al., 2022). The scale ranges from 0 to 21, with scores of 5, 10, and 15 indicating mild, moderate, or severe anxiety symptomatology, respectively.
- Depression levels: Depression was measured using the Patient Health Questionnaire nine-item version (PHQ-9), a scale validated for use in the general population (Kroenke, Spitzer & Williams, 2001). The scale was developed to assess the diagnostic criteria of depression as outlined by the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). Major depressive disorder (MDD) is considered present at a usual threshold of ≥ 10 (12–14), although alternate thresholds of 9, 11, or 12 have also been proposed (Gilbod et al., 2007). We used the Greek translation of the PHQ-9 (PHQ screeners, 2011), which has not been used previously within the Greek population, either in primary care or in medical settings The scale is validated for use in the Greek language (Hyphantis et al., 2011).
- Well-being levels: Well-being was assessed using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). This is a 14-item measure that has been used widely in similar research and is validated for use in general population samples of participants and is sufficiently sensitive for application in intervention evaluation (Stewart-Brow et al., 2009). The scale ranges from 14 to 70. The scale is translated in Greek (Warwick Medical School, 2022).



- Finally at the post-intervention assessment participants were asked to provide feedback of their experience of the workshop in written form. The purpose was to discover any follow-up outcomes, the analysis process merely identified such statements of outcomes and grouped them into themes. Quotations are used in the presentation of the findings as well as pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of participants. The open questions used were in accordance with that used in a previous study on the field which attempted to develop a new therapeutic intervention for depression under the arts on prescription movement (Haslam et al., 2019). The open questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Open questions

1. What were your reasons for attending the program Libraries on prescription?
What were your expectations when you started the program Libraries on prescription?
3. Did the program Libraries on prescription meet your expectations? If yes, in which level?
4. How would you describe your experience of participating in the program Libraries on prescription?
5. What do you think you gained from your participation in this program?
6. What changes would you suggest in the structure and the organisation of the program?

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative variables were expressed as mean values (SD) or as median values (interquartile range (IQR), based on variables distribution. Normality of the distributions was assessed both visually and through the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. Qualitative variables were expressed using relative and absolute frequencies.

The paired-Samples t-Test procedure was used to compare the means of two variables for a single group since normality of the distributions was deemed.

Results

Qualitative findings and feedback



The evaluation forms included six qualitative questions completed by the eight respondents. Respondents' characteristics are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' demographic characteristics

Participant 1	Male, Greek, 40 years old
Participant 2	Female, Greek, 26 years old
Participant 3	Female, Greek, 26 years old
Participant 4	Male, Greek, 31 years old
Participant 5	Female, Greek, 30 years old
Participant 6	Male, Greek, 35 years old
Participant 7	Female, Greek, 32 years old
Participant 8	Female, Greek, 31 years old

Participants' responses to these questions have been summarised as follows:

1. What were your reasons for attending the program Libraries on prescription?

Overall, participants seemed to be open to the idea of stand-up comedy as a creative way to express themselves, to socialise and promote their well-being and mental health. An example is Participant 3 who wrote: "It was an initiative that for me combined two things I'm very interested about, mental health and comedy. I was very happy with the fact that people with similar interests and concerns would be able to learn and create something comical and above all to transform something difficult into something more manageable through humour".

Several respondents talked about the great interest they find in this program and described it as a way to creatively enrich their day.

For example, Participant 1 described that this program seemed to him as a "a creative avocation".

2. What were your expectations when you started the program Libraries on prescription?

Most participants report that their main expectation had to do with learning stand-up comedy techniques and their need to express themselves through a creative way. Participant 2 wrote "I thought we all as a team would be able to develop our stand-up comedy skills". They also



reported their desire to meet new people, communicate with others, be part of a team and build new friendships. Participant 3 wrote: “Beyond the expectation of learning some elements about stand-up comedy, the expectation of creating a beautiful companionship was stronger”.

3. Did the program Libraries on prescription meet your expectations? If yes, in which level?

Most people felt that the program did meet their expectations while others reported that it was even better than what they expected. Participant 6 wrote: “The result exceeded my expectations to an extent that surprised me”. Some of the participants mention that in the beginning they had different expectations from the ones that the program fulfilled. However even those with different expectations appeared to be satisfied with the final result. 31 years old female wrote: “My expectations were met, but not in the way I expected, which ultimately left me with a good impression” (Participant

4. How would you describe your experience of participating in the program Libraries on prescription?

The descriptions of experience of participating were quite positive from all the reports of the participants. They defined the experience as very positive, pleasant, and interesting. As an example, Participant 5 wrote: “The experience of participating in the program gave me plenty of good memories”. While Participant 4 wrote: “The program made my Fridays beautiful and meaningful”.

5. What do you think you gained from your participation in this program?

Participants reported their own thoughts and experiences including feeling part of team and having the opportunity to work in groups. An example from Participant 3 who wrote: “ I met interesting people with whom we create a pleasant company”. Others also talked about how it benefited them in relation to their stand- up comedy skills.

Participant 4 reported to gain “theoretical knowledge in stand-up comedy” and learn new ideas for jokes. There were also reports about self-improvement and an opportunity to work with themselves and enhance their confidence. Participant 6 wrote: “This program helped me start an inner search of myself and ask myself further questions that will contribute to my self-improvement”.

6. What changes would you suggest in the structure and the organization of the program?

Most of the participants seemed to be satisfied with the structure and the organization of the program. However, as seen from the general feedback the main comment has mostly to do with the fact that the program duration was short. For example, Participant 2 wrote: “More programs



could possibly be included with more frequent cycles. We can't wait for a new cycle of stand-up comedy because we couldn't get enough".

One participant, Participant 1 expressed his thoughts about the time in which the program was held, suggesting that it would be maybe better to hold the program later in the afternoon in order to take into consideration those who are working.



Image by Dimitra Asimakopoulou



6. Case Studies

Patras University Library - South Greece, Peloponnese

The Library and Information Center (LIC) of the University of Patras constitutes the central library and 5 departmental libraries. Together they form a network of 6 libraries. The Library is open to all interested individuals, but its main mission is to serve the members of the academic community of the University. Consequently, the LIC members are:

- Faculty and research staff of the University of Patras (UP)
- Students of UP
- Postgraduate and PhD students of the UP
- Employees of the UP



Image by Patras University Library - South Greece, Peloponnese



"The Power of Words" is a commendable action that aims to assist students in dealing with mild mental pains and psychological pressures through creative writing techniques. The program takes place in an environment of knowledge and culture, specifically libraries, where students are encouraged to develop their skills through various exercises and creative writing techniques. The ultimate goal is to empower the participants by enabling them to recognize and express their concerns creatively, communicate with confidence, and foster mechanisms of personal growth.

Strengths:

Clear Purpose: The program's primary purpose of using creative writing techniques to address psychological issues is well-defined and focused. This clarity ensures that the participants understand the goals and can actively engage in the process.

Inclusive Approach: The program appears to be inclusive, allowing everyone to participate. The fact that even the shyest individuals engaged without hesitation is a positive indicator of its effectiveness in creating a comfortable and welcoming environment.

Positive Outcome: The initial meeting seems to have been successful, with active participation from all attendees. Participants were able to remember each other's names, indicating the development of friendly relations among them.

Commitment from Facilitators: The willingness of the facilitators to help with the program showcases a strong commitment to its success. Experienced and supportive facilitators can significantly contribute to achieving the program's objectives.

Potential for Continuation: The organisers express their desire to establish a sustainable initiative that extends beyond the pilot program. This commitment to long-term support is crucial for ensuring the lasting benefits of the program within the community.

Areas for Improvement:

Measuring Progress: While the initial meeting showed promise, it would be beneficial to set up mechanisms to assess the progress of individual participants over time. Regular evaluation can help track improvements in confidence, communication skills, and emotional well-being.



Diverse Creative Writing Techniques: Expanding the range of creative writing exercises and techniques can add variety to the program, keeping the participants engaged and allowing them to explore different aspects of their emotions and thoughts.

Addressing Potential Challenges: As the program progresses, there may be challenges to maintain consistent participation or address specific psychological issues that emerge. Developing strategies to handle such challenges proactively will enhance the program's effectiveness.

Incorporating Emotional Support: While the action aims to relieve psychological issues, it would be beneficial to include elements of emotional support, such as group discussions or individual counselling, to help participants cope with any emotional challenges they might encounter during the program.



Poster by Patras University Library - South Greece, Peloponnese

"The Power of Words" program demonstrates a promising approach to helping students cope with psychological pressures through creative writing techniques. The positive outcome of the initial meeting and the commitment of the facilitators are encouraging signs for its success. By addressing the suggested areas for improvement and ensuring continued support and evaluation, the program has the potential to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the



participants' lives. With its focus on empowerment, personal growth, and community support, "The Power of Words" can become a valuable resource for the well-being of its members.

They also produced an electronic book containing five stories written by students of the University of Patras who participated in the action "The Power of Words". The activity was carried out during the spring semester 2023 by the Library & Information Center, in collaboration with the Social Welfare of Students, in the framework of the pilot program "Library Prescription", which was designed and developed by the Athens Comics Library, in collaboration with Refugee Week Greece, and which is included in the Europe Challenge 2022 of the European Cultural Foundation.

You can read the book "The Power of Words", a collection of the creative writing essays from the programme participants [HERE](#)



Rapsani Municipality, Larissa, Public Library - Central Greece

The Rapsani Municipal Library reopened in 2004 in the attic of the community store and in the interior you will find more than 20,000 books. The library material consists of books, magazines, manuscripts, cartographic and audiovisual material. The library has in its collection the only written surviving text concerning the history of Rapsani and the second register of Thessaly, "The Book of St. Athanasius, 1778-1889", and a large number of 18th century publications.



Image by Haido Pantazi, Rapsani Municipality, Larissa, Public Library - Central Greece

The "Herb Discovery and Wellness" program was a successful and engaging initiative that focused on herbal knowledge, mental health improvement, and community involvement. The program had a clear structure, including regular meetings, social media communication, herbal walks, and herb collection. It started with 11 participants who signed up, completed relevant questionnaires, and attended the initial meeting.



From the first meeting, there arose a need to communicate with the group through social media platforms. As a result, a group was created on messenger and viber, where every Friday, participants received reminders about the upcoming Saturday meeting and shared information about the local herbs. The social media groups also included people who could not be physically present but provided valuable information about herbs, such as Mr. G.K. from South Africa and S. from Brussels.

Each meeting was followed by a walk and herb collection, leading to the creation of a botanical list of herbs along with records of their properties. The details of these herbs were planned for publication in a manual. Additionally, participants enjoyed tea made from various herbal blends, and each person brought their own tea, which was distributed among the group.

The program proved to be popular, and the group expanded from 11 to 20 members. Simultaneously, the entire local community of the village actively participated, contributing material daily. This community involvement reflected the program's success in fostering a shared interest in herbal knowledge and well-being.

One significant outcome of the program was its positive effect on participants' mental health. The ability of the herbal stories to change the social, behavioural, and psychological levels of individuals was evident. The program facilitated the development of friendships among participants, allowing them to exchange ideas and spend creative time together outside of the formal meetings.

Throughout the program, the need for communication among individuals was evident. Participants eagerly looked forward to each meeting and expressed their desire for the program to continue beyond its initial phase.

While the program showcased clear strengths, there were opportunities for further enhancement. For instance, implementing a formal evaluation process and documenting the program's impact would have provided objective measures of participants' progress and well-being. Additionally, encouraging more cultural exchange with individuals from different parts of the world through social media could have enriched the participants' knowledge and experiences.



Image by Haido Pantazi, Rapsani Municipality, Larissa, Public Library - Central Greece

The programme could have further expanded its reach and impact by creating educational resources, such as manuals or guides, to disseminate herbal knowledge and promote sustainable practices. Moreover, forming collaborations and partnerships with relevant organisations could have extended the program's influence.

In conclusion, the "Herb Discovery and Wellness" program proved to be a successful community initiative that combined herbal knowledge, mental health improvement, and social interaction. Its expansion to involve the local community and the potential formation of a natural dyeing and weaving group demonstrated its positive influence. With the commitment and enthusiasm shown by the participants, the program had the potential to continue making a meaningful impact on the well-being of its participants and the broader community.



Psychiko Municipality, Athens, Public Library of Organisation for Solidarity, Culture and Sports - Athens

The Filothei – Psychiko Municipal Library is a member of the Greek Library Network of the National Library of Greece. It has more than 3000 members and provides its services through its Main Building and its Annex.

The main building is in the house of Kosmas Politis, one of the most important authors of the 1930s. Its collection includes over 18.000 volumes of books and CDs and people can use the library's online catalogue to locate books.

The library has developed various important activities such as book clubs, authors invited to make book presentations, educational programs designed by the National Library in collaboration with schools. It also organises free of charge musical and literary events.



Image by Aggeliki Fournari, Psychiko Municipality, Athens, Public Library of Organisation for Solidarity, Culture and Sports - Athens

The "Library on Prescription" program, implemented by the OKAPA Filotheis-Psychikou Municipal Library in collaboration with ESTIA / ESTIA, the Athens Comics Library, the Refugee Week Greece festival, the European Cultural Foundation, and the Society for Regional Development and Mental Health (EPAPSY), aimed at fostering cross-sectoral collaboration



among libraries, health professionals, and cultural activities to improve mental health and well-being. This program served as a complementary culture action, offering an innovative alternative treatment approach in a safe space for vulnerable population groups, with a specific focus on highlighting the healing power of stories and libraries as safe healing spaces.

During the implementation of the pilot phase, the program faced a unique challenge in working with children with mental retardation. The organisers acknowledged that there were no similar projects, particularly for this specific population, making it an uncharted territory. Despite this challenge, they were committed to exploring new methods to evaluate the program's impact effectively.



Image by Aggeliki Fournari, Psychiko Municipality, Athens, Public Library of Organisation for Solidarity, Culture and Sports - Athens

Given the complexity of working with children with mental health challenges and learning difficulties, the organisers considered using qualitative evaluation methods with open-ended questions rather than mixed methods typically employed with the general public. They believed that qualitative approaches could provide deeper insights into the children's experiences and outcomes in the program.



The organisers expressed a strong interest in gathering feedback from professionals who work with these children to enhance the evaluation process. They sought suggestions and insights on how to facilitate the evaluation effectively. By engaging with experts in the field, they aimed to refine and improve the program to better suit the needs of the children and achieve its intended goals.

Overall, the "Library Prescription" program was a forward-thinking initiative that recognized the potential of collaborative efforts between libraries, health professionals, and cultural activities to positively impact mental health and well-being. The program's willingness to venture into unexplored territory and openness to qualitative evaluation methods demonstrated its commitment to finding innovative solutions to benefit vulnerable population groups, specifically children with mental retardation. By actively seeking professional input and feedback, the organisers showed their dedication to continuous improvement and ensuring the program's success in creating safe healing spaces for those in need.



Ayia, Crete, Prison Library - Crete

The Agricultural Prison of Ayia's Library has been operational since 2002 and is located in the event hall of the facility. It is open every morning and afternoon, providing access to all prisoners. The library was established to facilitate prisoners' self-education, promote entertainment, and encourage creative use of their free time. Its collection is continually enriched through donations from various organisations, bodies, publishing houses, and individuals, with support from the Store's Social Workers who oversee its operation.

Currently, the library boasts a collection of over 6000 book titles, covering various subjects such as history, science, literature, professional topics, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and magazines. Additionally, there are books available in different languages besides Greek. The library also functions as a reading room, providing ample table seats and a welcoming environment for reading. It frequently supports educational programs conducted in the facility by offering its resources, such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

The library's day-to-day maintenance is carried out by inmates working as librarians as part of their beneficial basis penalty days. Furthermore, the library is connected to the Municipal Library of Chania, allowing prisoners access to book titles that may not be available in the facility's own collection.

The "Virtual Museum Visits" program proved to be a highly successful and engaging initiative that started in mid-March. The program aimed to provide a group of 10 prisoners with unique opportunities to connect with various museums, thereby promoting creative expression, cultural engagement, and improved mental well-being. Throughout the process, the program successfully established collaborations with a diverse range of prestigious museums, including the Acropolis Museum, the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the Museum of School Life and Education in Plaka, the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Athens, the Eleftherios Venizelos Museum of Chania, the Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art of Thessaloniki-MOMUS, the Museum of Natural History of Crete-University, and the Municipal Art Gallery of Chania.



Image by Zoi Hatzi, Ayia, Crete, Prison Library - Crete

One key aspect that significantly impressed the program organisers was the enthusiastic and positive response from the executives of the museums. The museums showed a remarkable willingness to participate and actively contribute to the program. They not only found suitable times and logistical infrastructure to facilitate the virtual tours but also took the initiative to plan activities tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of the group of 10 prisoners. This level of support and cooperation from the museums played a vital role in the program's success.

The "Live Digital Museum Tours" were thoughtfully designed, with parallel experiential activities that allowed the prisoners to engage creatively with the artworks and exhibits. These virtual tours and activities aimed to foster a sense of community connection, provide access to cultural resources, and reduce feelings of isolation among the participants.

The program's multifaceted approach encompassed various aspects that contributed to the prisoners' personal development and mental well-being. Through art and culture, the program successfully created a platform for socialising and enhancing the prisoners' personalities, providing them with positive outlets for self-expression.

By enabling virtual museum visits, the program effectively leveraged modern technology to break down barriers and offer prisoners unique opportunities they may not have otherwise had. The engagement with prestigious museums and the positive attitudes from museum executives showcased the value of such cultural initiatives within the prison system.



Image by Zoi Hatzi, Ayia, Crete, Prison Library - Crete

Overall, the "Virtual Museum Visits" program demonstrated the power of art and culture to positively impact the lives of prisoners. Its success in fostering creativity, cultural engagement, and improved mental well-being emphasised the importance of incorporating such programs into correctional facilities. The program not only connected prisoners with the wider community but also opened doors to cultural experiences that have the potential to leave a lasting and transformative impact on their lives.



7. Lessons Learnt

Lessons Learned from the Above Programs:

Inclusive Approach: Successful programs prioritise inclusivity, creating environments where all participants feel comfortable and welcome. In both "The Power of Words" and "Herb Discovery and Wellness," efforts were made to ensure even the shyest individuals felt encouraged to participate, fostering a sense of belonging and friendship.

Clear Purpose and Structure: Effective programs have clear objectives and well-defined structures. "The Power of Words" and "Library Prescription" had specific aims, such as addressing mental health issues and improving well-being. This clarity allowed for focused implementation and evaluation.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaborative efforts enhance program success. Both "The Power of Words" and "Herb Discovery and Wellness" involved collaborations with external organisations, professionals, and community members, which enriched the experiences and expanded their reach.

Flexibility and Adaptability: Programs must be adaptable to different audiences and needs. The organisers of "Herb Discovery and Wellness" acknowledged the challenge of working with children with mental retardation and were open to qualitative evaluation methods to better understand their experiences.

Continuous Evaluation and Improvement: Regular evaluation and documentation help measure progress and identify areas for improvement. The organisers of "The Power of Words" recognized the importance of tracking participants' development over time to ensure the program's long-term impact.

Cultural Exchange and Diversity: Engaging with different cultures and languages enriches experiences. The "Herb Discovery and Wellness" program fostered connections with individuals from different parts of the world, promoting cultural exchange and learning.

Community Involvement: Successful programmes engage the community actively. "Herb Discovery and Wellness" expanded to involve the entire local community, creating a sense of shared interest and support.



Technology as an Enabler: Embracing technology can break barriers and provide unique opportunities. The "Virtual Museum Visits" program utilised modern technology to offer prisoners access to cultural resources and experiences beyond the prison walls.

Empowerment and Personal Growth: Empowering participants to express themselves creatively and providing opportunities for personal growth are valuable aspects of effective programs. "The Power of Words" and "Virtual Museum Visits" aimed to boost participants' confidence, self-expression, and mental well-being.

Long-Term Sustainability: Establishing long-term initiatives ensures lasting impact. The organisers of "The Power of Words" expressed their commitment to creating a sustainable program beyond the pilot phase to continue supporting their community.

Overall, these lessons underscore the significance of fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and flexibility while maintaining clear objectives and continuously evaluating programs for their effectiveness and impact. Successful initiatives create positive and supportive environments, empowering participants to grow and thrive personally and emotionally.

8. The way forward

The way forward for libraries as a tool for social cohesion and spaces that heal involves a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of community engagement, accessibility, and holistic well-being. Here are some key steps to advance libraries in this direction:

Inclusivity and Diverse Programming: Libraries should actively work towards promoting inclusivity and diversity in their programs and services. They should curate a wide range of cultural, educational, and recreational activities that cater to various age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and interests. By embracing diversity, libraries can become hubs for social cohesion, bringing together individuals from different walks of life.

Collaborative Partnerships: Building collaborative partnerships with local community organisations, healthcare providers, social services, and cultural institutions can enhance the libraries' role as spaces that heal. These partnerships can result in joint initiatives, workshops, and support networks that address community needs and promote well-being.



Mental Health and Well-being Support: Libraries can actively integrate mental health support and resources into their services. This can include hosting mental health workshops, providing access to self-help books, offering meditation or mindfulness sessions, and collaborating with mental health professionals to provide counselling services.

Creative Expression and Arts: Encouraging creative expression through various arts programs, such as writing workshops, art exhibitions, and storytelling events, can foster healing and personal growth. Libraries can serve as safe spaces for individuals to express themselves and connect with others through artistic endeavours.

Digital Access and Virtual Engagement: Embracing technology and offering digital access to resources can help libraries extend their reach beyond physical spaces. Virtual engagement, such as online book clubs, live author talks, and virtual museum tours, can provide valuable opportunities for social interaction and learning, even during challenging times.

Community-Centred Spaces: Libraries can transform into community-centred spaces that cater to the unique needs of their users. This may involve redesigning spaces to accommodate group activities, providing flexible seating arrangements, and creating dedicated areas for wellness activities.

Empowering Librarians: Investing in librarian training and professional development related to mental health, community engagement, and diversity will empower librarians to better serve their communities. Equipped with these skills, librarians can play a pivotal role in creating healing spaces and promoting social cohesion.

Advocacy and Funding: Advocating for the importance of libraries as community hubs and healing spaces is crucial to garner support from policymakers and secure funding. Libraries need sustainable resources to continue their vital role in promoting social cohesion and well-being.

By adopting these strategies and embracing libraries as more than repositories of books, but as vibrant community centres, we can pave the way for them to become powerful tools for social cohesion and spaces that heal, enriching the lives of individuals and fostering stronger, more connected communities.



APPENDIX 1

Organisations

Athens Comics Library

Athens Comics Library is designed to be a place of inspiration and creation of experiences, learning and exploration, participation and creativity. We have extensive experience in using comics and storytelling for social impact campaigns, to change narrative and provide educational tools for people (especially coming from disadvantaged backgrounds) to raise their voices and be heard and seen. Comics pose as an efficient and mainstream storytelling medium, having the power to transfer messages and knowledge on moral and social concepts, through a pop-culture, fun and exciting storytelling, often including supernatural or extreme cases that appeal even more to young populations.

Comics creation is nevertheless a co-creation process, rendering it thus as a tool that fosters collaboration, teamwork and creativity. Storytelling, comics and psychosocial methodologies can help especially displaced people to talk about things that they might find hard, connect with each other and ask questions. “Part of the appeal is that people are more likely to read a comic than an essay, but it’s more than that. The ability to layer images and text in multiple ways provides an efficient way to communicate a message that easily captures ambiguities and tensions that can be difficult to convey in written text alone.”

Anyone who has read a comic book can probably guess that community cohesion and visual storytelling have a long and fascinating history together. From the anxieties of Charlie Brown to the childhood trauma of Mister Miracle, comics offer a varied and ever-evolving glimpse into trauma and displacement. Comics and graphic novels play a role in normalising discussions of mental health, wellbeing and they offer unique perspectives on the innumerable forms communities can take, and, perhaps most importantly, remind those who are struggling that they are not alone.

Our working approach is based on enabling and supporting a wide range of arts, cultural and educational activities that bring people together across difference, educate and lead to empathy and connection

Refugee Week Greece



Refugee Week is a global and dynamic movement, a cultural festival celebrating the contribution, creativity and authenticity of people having experienced forced migration. It takes place every year on the 20th of June, on World Refugee Day. This year, it is coming to Greece with the initiative of Athens Comics Library, in collaboration with Counterpoints Arts, supported by Comic Relief Across Borders programme.

The initiative is a cultural festival, part of a dynamic global movement, and promotes the contribution, creativity and resilience of refugees and people seeking refuge. Refugee Week is a platform in which all are welcome to take part in, whether it is attending or organising an event, activity or workshop. Already, prominent refugee organisations in Greece are participating by sharing their message of solidarity, inclusion and social equality.

Refugee Week Greece aspires to build a stronger collaboration between various stakeholders that can share and create a positive message for refugees, one that prones us to change our everyday lives and work on more inclusive societies together.

EPAPSY

EPAPSY (Association for Regional Development and Mental Healthcare) was established in 1988, on the initiative of Prof. Stelios Stylianidis; since then, it is continuously active aiming to offer an alternative model of psychosocial care to the community based on the principles of Social Psychiatry and Psychosocial Rehabilitation.

Especially during the last years, having assumed the scientific and administrative responsibility for running in total twenty-three accommodation units of psychosocial rehabilitation, two mobile units of mental healthcare in the Cyclades islands and one day care centre, EPAPSY is innovating with the development of a network of services and professionals working for the purposes of social psychiatry. EPAPSY has supported the establishment and function of the Social Cooperative of Limited Liability in the 5 th Attica District for Mental Healthcare provision, in the administrative Region of Central Greece and the city of Trikala, as well as local associations of mental health (in Chalkida, the northern suburbs of Athens, the Region of Viotia).

It is EPAPSY's aim to provide a model of comprehensive mental healthcare to the community. The quality of care is assured via the interdisciplinary collaboration, the application of WHO guidelines, the connection to the local services, local providers, users and families, the fight



against the stigma and the social exclusion, the continuous learning and training of professionals.

The mental healthcare services provided by the association are controlled and funded via the regular budget, under the supervision and upon authorization of the Ministry of Healthcare. In parallel, in the context of proper management, the financial reporting of our association is annually controlled by independent chartered accountants, while our budget is also submitted to the Court of Auditors.

APPENDIX 2

Media Mentions

[Θεραπεία με συνταγή γιατρού στη βιβλιοθήκη Ραψάνης!](#)

[Libraries on Prescription - Culture for Health](#)

[Στις βιβλιοθήκες με... συνταγή γιατρού - ΤΑ ΝΕΑ](#)

[«Το βιβλίο μας κάνει καλύτερους ανθρώπους» – Μια εκδήλωση της ΟΛΥΜΠΟΣ στο Μακρυχώρι](#)

[Επισκέψεις σε βιβλιοθήκες ως εργαλείο καταπολέμησης προβλημάτων ψυχικής υγείας - Αθηναϊκό Μακεδονικό Πρακτορείο Ειδήσεων](#)

[Συνταγογράφηση... Βιβλιοθηκών: Το Διάβασμα ως Θεραπευτικό Εργαλείο - ΑθηΝΕΑ](#)

[Συνταγογράφηση... Βιβλίου: Οι Βιβλιοθήκες ως Θεραπευτικό Εργαλείο στην Επούλωση Ψυχικών Τραυμάτων - Psychology, Η πύλη της Ψυχολογίας](#)

[Ραδιοφωνική συνέντευξη στην εκπομπή#NaMaste](#)

[Η άγνωστη δύναμη του Σούπερμαν- Καθημερινή](#)

[Επισκέψεις σε βιβλιοθήκες ως εργαλείο καταπολέμησης προβλημάτων ψυχικής υγείας](#)

[Culture for Health Libraries on Prescription](#)

[EPAPSY podcast: Libraries on Prescription](#)

[Sense of Belonging e-book](#)

[Libraries on Prescription @ The CoMuseum Conference](#)



APPENDIX 3

Resources

Library related resources

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Using trauma-sensitive mindfulness in museums
https://www.museumnext.com/article/using-trauma-sensitive-mindfulness-in-museums/?fbclid=IwAR0J79j0vGlcvkCSZxefGpw59HLDpqbNngYnsl_kwDv8CA5nydsMOUorDul&utm_source=pocket_mylist

Mental health stories: When sharing really is caring
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APPENDIX 4

Team Bios



Dr Lida Tsene
Academic &
Researcher

Passionate about communication, Lida holds a degree in Communication, Media and Culture and a PhD on Social Media and Social Responsibility. She has been teaching communication since 2010 and working in the field for more than ten years. She is Head of PR, Art and Educational Programs of Comicon Athens, founder of the Athens Comics Library, managing co-director of the Digital Comics Museum, organiser and curator of several events, exhibitions, conferences and workshops. Currently she is a researcher and teaching associate at the MA Program Communication and New Journalism of Open University of Cyprus. She has



participated in international conferences on media, digital media, entrepreneurship, storytelling and social impact, while she also designs and facilitates workshops applying design thinking and team building methodologies. She is a SUSI Alumna of the U.S. Department of State.



Dina Ntziora
Project Manager &
Community Engagement Associate

A Cultural Manager and Community Engagement Producer committed to making places more memorable, fun, participatory, equitable and sociable. Focusing on creating public spaces and community connections that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being by investing in the local community's assets, inspiration, and potential. She delivers community-driven, inclusive and transformative projects for both neighbourhoods and citizens, with extensive experience in arts management, creative community engagement, audience development, setting up and developing systems and working with community-led data to build and oversee strong local ecosystems.

Since 2017 she has worked with migrant and refugee communities for the City of Athens and Athens Comics Library and has been in advisory roles with other organisations in the city. She has studied International and European Economics and Politics at Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB) and holds an MSc in Development, Administration and Planning. She has previously worked for Bristol City Council, British Council, Athens Municipality and Athens Development Agency and is an active member of the European Placemaking Network. She is also a mentor for Women on Top in Athens.

Athens, Greece
August 2023