

Planting Seeds

FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN KILLALOE

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT



Introduction

In the winter of 2019, the Ottawa Valley Creative Arts Open Studio (OV-CAOS), Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre, and the Community Resource Centre (Killaloe) hosted a series of community art workshops aimed at engaging people in artmaking and conversations about mental health. The project grew out of questions about how we, as a community, could better care for those living with mental health challenges, caregivers, and one another.

Artmaking is well known for its healing and community-building benefits. As a community

arts organization, OV-CAOS has experienced the powerful impact of people making art together in ways that nurture personal and collective imaginations. Most participants in this project expressed their ideas about mental health by creating miniature worlds.

In all, 75 people attended open community workshops and 16 young people participated in a youth workshop. Together with others who participated through an outreach component, they created 134 miniature worlds.



THE QUESTIONS THAT WERE POSED

What does being mentally healthy mean to you?

What do you think is working to support mental health in Killaloe?

What are your hopes and dreams for mental health in Killaloe?

What is missing? What challenges and barriers do we face?

How can we, as a community, support the mental health and well-being of people living in the Killaloe area?

What can we do as organizations to support mental health in Killaloe?

How do you feel about having a community garden designed to support mental health in Killaloe?

Do you have any questions about mental health? What do you want to know more about?

What can we, as caregivers, do to support mental health in Killaloe?

What can we do as professionals to support mental health in Killaloe?

METHODS OF COLLECTING FEEDBACK

Entries in a community journal

Notes from the Kitchen Table Conversation

White board notes

Artwork titles and descriptions

Written responses to questions

Word play poems/collage

Outreach kits

Who we worked with

Mental health issues are not only an individual or family concern, they touch the entire community. With this in mind, the workshops were open to everyone. We also targeted the following groups:

- Professionals — people who work directly with, or frequently encounter people struggling with mental health
- Caregivers — those who are caring for people struggling with mental health
- People who struggle with mental health
- Grade five students at Killaloe Public School
- Youth contacted through Family and Children’s Services-County of Renfrew and the Community Resource Centre (Killaloe)



What we did

COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

Three open workshops were held at the CRC's North Street Community Centre in Killaloe. Art supplies were provided, along with the written questions. The room included a quiet corner where people could sit and talk, write in the community journal, or create a word collage.

OUTREACH

Understanding that not everyone is able to join a workshop, we created outreach kits so people could participate from their home or workplace. Kits were delivered to Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre (Killaloe); Seniors Active Living Centre (Killaloe); Ontario Provincial Police (Killaloe); Phoenix Centre (Pembroke); Bernadette McCann House (Pembroke); and Madawaska Valley Hospice (Barry's Bay). In partnership with the CRC, the Phoenix Centre and Family and Children's Services-County of Renfrew, a special workshop was organized for youth, and artists worked directly with Grade five students at Killaloe Public School.

PUBLIC ART INSTALLATIONS

The miniature art pieces were incorporated into five public art installations. These

installations were exhibited in the village of Killaloe from June to September 2019 in the following locations: Community Resource Centre, Garth's Kitchen, Killaloe Post Office, Killaloe and District Public Library, and Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre.

WALKABOUT ART UNVEILING EVENT

The art installations were unveiled on May 30, 2019, in a community walkabout. Participants and community members gathered at the Killaloe and District Public Library, where Kokomis Roberta Della-Picca welcomed the group. Folk musicians Emilyn Stam and John David Williams led everyone through the streets of Killaloe. At each location, artists were poised to animate the installations with offerings of food, poetry and music. The walkabout ended at Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre, where the closing ceremony included more food, folk dancing and singing a song together.

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of the project was to contribute to a community dialogue about mental health through artmaking and conversation. In the process, we hoped to reduce the stigma associated with living with mental illness.



THEMES

Ten interconnected themes emerged from the feedback collected throughout the project. In addition to addressing the need for more mental health awareness and more services — important issues in this small rural community — participants identified a wide range of concerns.

Many people addressed the health benefits of maintaining connections to the natural world. Others identified needs associated with the social determinants of mental health, including housing, employment, and transportation. Not surprisingly, for a project that included artmaking, many people also noted the positive experience of making art together and the importance of having public spaces where people can gather and connect with each other.

Following is a summary of the themes:

1. Public spaces
2. Art experiences
3. Mental health awareness
4. The natural world
5. Self-care
6. Public mental health services
7. Physical health
8. Employment/housing
9. Families

10. Public transportation

1. PUBLIC SPACES

The importance of having access to indoor and outdoor **public spaces** was mentioned often. The desire is for these places to be inviting, inclusive, and aesthetically pleasing. The benefits of offering programs in public spaces were expressed in terms of the following:

- reducing isolation
- increasing a sense of belonging
- fostering relationships
- increasing tolerance, and
- building resilience.

Hopes and dreams included,

“Having relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love and hope.”

One person wrote about how creating safe physical and emotional spaces provides opportunities for people to work on mental health. There was support for creating a mental health garden, with one option being a garden on the grounds of Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre in Killaloe. The future could include the actual planting of seeds and shrubs along pathways in a green space dedicated to peace, healing and contemplation.



2. ART EXPERIENCES

“Access to art in our day-to-day lives”

Many participants expressed a desire for more art opportunities in public spaces. They talked about access to **visual arts, music and dance**, with an emphasis on experiencing art with other people. Others mentioned the need for safe, open, inclusive venues, “without fees, without judgment.”

“Some things I know contribute to mental health and well-being:

Dancing to music I love
Singing
Creative opportunities”

3. MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

“It’s sometimes hard to talk in a small community.”

Participants expressed concerns about the negative effects of stigma on people struggling with mental health and on people caring for those dealing with a mental health problem. There is a desire to “make mental health visible” and for the broader community to have a better understanding of mental health:

“Begin to see the gift of those who carry an expanded/altered reality.”

“Being mentally healthy is not a permanent state. If we are lucky, we will spend more time in our life being mentally healthy than mentally unhealthy.”

“Sometimes rock bottom is a fine foundation for growth.”

Dream for the future:

“That no one is suffering from isolation due to stigma of mental health via shunning.”

The following ideas were suggested by participants as a way of increasing awareness and reducing stigma:

- Build a mental health garden
- Host workshops and seminars about mental health issues
- Offer training sessions for frontline retail and service workers, as they are interacting with people every day.

When asked about the idea of a mental health garden, one person said, “It brings the invisible into the public milieu, while providing a visible reminder that mental health is an organic, ever-changing phenomenon, very dependent upon the environment...” Another person felt a garden “would be very helpful in promoting community awareness and supporting mental health and well-being.”

“Mental health can be complicated, textured and look very different at different times and from different angles.”

— *From the description of a miniature called “Many Sides”*



4. THE NATURAL WORLD

The phrase “**connection with nature**” was often used in the context of its positive contribution to mental health. The benefits of gardening were noted, along with spending time with other people in nature. Creating a mental health garden would provide a “calm setting” where people could connect with the natural world and take “time to reflect.” People also suggested providing access to outdoor activities, such as nature walks, available “rain or shine or snow.”

5. SELF-CARE

The importance of **self-care** as a tool for maintaining good mental health was discussed by participants in terms of what mental health means to them and in the context of connecting with nature and gardening. Self-care was envisioned in terms of individual practices or techniques (meditation, deep breathing, positive affirmations, journaling) as well as participating in organized activities such as artmaking, music, dance, yoga, and tai chi. Self-care also includes connecting with other people, as in “chatting with a trusted confidante.”

“I need
 Someone to talk to
 Someone to laugh with
 A feeling that I belong in my community
 Sometimes I need help, sometimes I offer help”

6. PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

“Connect all of the resources for mental health in Renfrew County so we all know what each other is doing — one big list of services easily accessible.”

Participants expressed a desire for more **public mental health services** in the community and for more clear information about what services exist now and how the services can be accessed. Some practical suggestions offered by participants:

- Offer therapists and counsellors in safe places like the CRC
- More counsellors and therapists that are funded by the government
- Mental health education for police and health professionals, delivered by people who have lived experience
- Peer support for people in emergency rooms
- Coordinated mental health services
- Access to information about resources for people with serious mental health challenges
- Explore tele-medicine connections
- Coordinated post-partum care
- More funding, more counsellors, more doctors
- Support during transitions
- Mental health roundtables — keep talking!



“Work with each other to maximize what we have and advocate for more services as needs of community change.”

7. PHYSICAL HEALTH

“Why do we separate mental and **physical health**? They are deeply connected. Completely connected! YES!”

Many of the participants made a connection between physical health, a healthy diet, exercise, and mental health, thus advocating for a more holistic approach to health and well-being.

8. EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING

“Worthwhile jobs. Pride in belonging.”

Participants expressed that having **employment**, food to eat, and a place to live are factors in mental health; the idea that having pride in what you do is an important element of mental health, as is community involvement or working with other people toward something that matters.

“Being outside, completing an activity and being able to watch the progress and have a sense of pride and accomplishment as things grow.”

“I need...”

- A safe place to live
- Something to do

- Enough money to meet my needs and my family’s
- Supportive housing
- Supportive employment opportunities”

9. CHILDREN

“How do we make the community healthy for kids? **Listen to them.**”

Some of the participants talked about mental health and **children**. Reading to and playing with children were mentioned as ways of building good mental health. There were requests for mindfulness programming for children.

“Read a lot! Children will emulate and grow up literate. Support new things — live art! Make jobs and useful tasks. Play with children — keep very close. Say hello, or wave.”

10. PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The lack of public transportation came up as a barrier to mental health in two ways. First, people can become very isolated, especially in the rural area outside of the communities, and second, it limits access to mental health services.

“How to stay connected with community? Rural, winter, poverty”



Recommendations

- More public spaces (indoor and outdoor), more programming and more informal social gatherings for community members of all ages. This would reduce social isolation and foster the sense of belonging that is so important to mental health.
- More opportunities to participate in creative activities, including visual arts, dance, and music.
- Promote mental health awareness and, especially, education to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. One idea was to create a mental health garden in the community, a quiet place for people to connect with nature and a public space for education and awareness activities.
- Promote self-care for everyone, including people living with mental illness and their friends and families.
- More public mental health services, including access to therapists and counsellors whose fees are covered by OHIP or other government sources.
- Acknowledge the deep connection between physical and mental health, including the protective impact of healthy diets and exercise.
- Increase access to employment and housing as a way to promote overall health. The stress of living with poverty and homelessness can seriously deteriorate a person's physical and mental health.
- Take care of the children — provide for the full range of activities and supports that keep children healthy and happy. This

includes everything from access to libraries and outdoor play spaces to listening to them when they need someone to talk to.

- Access to public transportation — this is a barrier to mental and physical health in rural areas, a barrier made more acute when combined with poverty and our long, harsh winters.

Suggested ways to use this document

This community art project provided physical and emotional space for conversations about mental health. There are many ways that we can continue the conversation, some of which are outlined in this document. Please share this report and the ideas in it with other people. Let's continue the conversation!

Project Partners

Community Resource Centre
Ottawa Valley Creative Arts Open Studio
Rainbow Valley Community Health Centre
Ontario Arts Council (funder)



Planting Seeds for Mental Health Team

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