START from Withn

AN ART-LED COLLABORATION BETWEEN NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE AND INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH TO COMPLEMENT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CARE

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Introduction

stART from Within, adapted from National Gallery Singapore's Strength Through Art (stART) programme, is co-organised with the Institute of Mental Health using a strength-based approach to enhance visual and emotional literacy through creative practice beyond clinical care for youth outpatients.

Objectives

To present how the programme:
(1) integrates museum-based therapeutic activities by Gallery educators and IMH art therapist; and
(2) adopts flexible, arts-based participatory approaches to complement medical interventions in youth mental health ecosystems.

Method

PROGRAMME CO-CREATION AND DELIVERY

1. **Guided by stART's Name-Frame-Reframe framework**

NAME → FRAME → RE-FRAME

2. **Informed by neuroaesthetics, art-led pedagogies, and art therapy principles**

Neuroaesthetics
Engagement with visual art activates neural circuits associated with emotion regulation, reward, and meaning-making (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014; Zeki, 1999). Aesthetic experiences stimulate the brain's default mode network, implicated in self-reflection and autobiographical processing, providing neurological grounding for art as a vehicle for emotional insight in young people.

Art pedagogies
Art was used as a catalyst for self-discovery, to examine perspectives that shape lived experiences and creatively reframe those stories through art expression (Esiner, 2002). Through viewing, dialogue and artmaking, participants build emotional literacy and agency within a non-clinical, strengths-based museum environment.

Art therapy principles
Adopting a studio-based, person-centred approach, the therapeutic relationship between facilitator, participant, and artwork becomes a site of trust, co-regulation, and healing. Creative expression externalises and processes internal emotional states (Malchiodi, 2012), while art medium serves as a containing non-judgemental space where difficult emotions are safely held & explored.

3. **Session Plan Refinement**

The stART framework provided the backbone while the content and delivery were intentionally kept flexible. Facilitator debriefs after each session informed ongoing refinements, enabling an agile, youth-centred approach that responded to participants' needs and experiences.

ONGOING FEEDBACK FOR PROGRAMME REFINEMENT

(a) Youths' self-report (pre- and mid- programme):

- **[PRE-] Mental health literacy**: 10% (excellent), 50% (good), 30% (fair) & 10% (poor). **Resilience**: 54% (good), 31% (fair), 15% (poor). **Art-making experiences**: 56% good/professional & enjoy art for self-expressions; 22% adopts art as hobby; the rest with no experience or usually give up. Over half said art helps them to express emotions non-verbally and heal.
- **[MID-]** Participants rated on **enjoyment in art-making:** 72% strongly agree/agree; **enjoyment in Gallery visits:** 62% strongly agree/agree; & **Programme is 'helpful for my wellbeing':** 90%

(b) Youth-peer observation

Field-notes & observations by a youth-alumni participant:

- Environment (light, spacing) needs to be improved to enhance level of focus and attention for youth
- Elements of art were used by youths to represent life experiences and transformed difficult feelings into visual form. They linked emotions to the artworks they chose and used different materials to express themselves.
- Notable changes were observed across sessions, with participants becoming "more open" and "more confident." They progressed from sharing when prompted to voluntarily sharing with one another and exploring together.



Artworks by the participants

(c) Youth co-leadership

- Participants showed an increased sense of psychological safety when they led parts of stART.

8-WEEK ART ENGAGEMENT @ THE GALLERY AND A SHOWCASE @ BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MENTAL HEALTH 2026 (BICOMH)

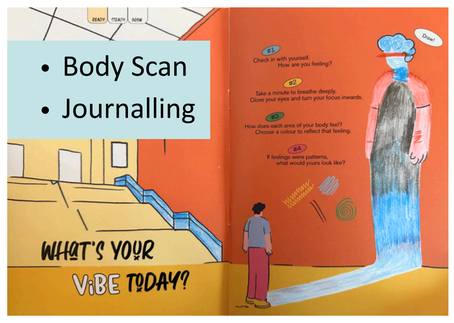
Recruitment — Dec 25-Feb 26 → 8-week of art engagement — Feb - May 26 → Showcase @ BICOMH — Jul 26

TYPICAL SESSION COMPONENTS

COMFORT FOOD



GROUNDING ACTIVITIES



ART ACTIVITIES



GALLERY ART-VIEWING



CONNECTION



Results

- 16 outpatients engaged through Institute of Mental Health and 1 dropped out due to work commitment.
- Out of 15 participants, 13 submitted artworks with 10 written narratives of their lived experiences for the showcase.
- Attendance: 76% (average) & 20% attended all sessions.

- **A thematic analysis of artwork narratives** shows over 60% identified **three therapeutic effects**:
  1. Art for communication; 2. Emotional healing;
  3. Connection through shared experiences
- **FOUR KEY overarching themes of self-expressions**:
  - Hope, Resilience, Grief and Autonomy.
- Post-programme qualitative feedback (through group's verbal sharing) noted:
  - 100% wanted the programme to continue & willing to participate through a 1-year duration.
  - Majority finds the programme helpful with
  - 1) non-judgmental art-making, 2) low stigma, 3) group setting, 4) non-clinical, & 5) not focused on problems or symptoms.

- **A post-programme feedback form** noted:

The motivating factors for me to take part in this programme: (Choose all that apply)	%
a. I want to improve my mental health	75
b. I want to build a more consistent routine in my recovery	75
c. I want to reduce relapses	50
d. I want to make more friends	37.5
f. I want to exhibit my artwork publicly	62.5
g. I am curious about the art programme in National Gallery	62.5
e. I want to participate in a community programme	62.5
Others: Maybe to advocate about mental health one day	12.5
Others: I wanted to have a space to make art where I wouldn't be judged for it	12.5
Others: I want to explore how art can be part of my coping.	12.5

Conclusions

This collaboration demonstrates how youth outpatients develop agency and recognise strengths through structured, flexible, arts-based participatory approaches in a culturally safe setting that allows time for reflection and meaning-making. As a non-clinical community asset, the Gallery complements IMH's medical interventions by supporting emotional literacy and social connection, strengthening engagement within youth mental health ecosystems. Future research should explore scalable, replicable models for integrating cultural institutions as evidence-informed components within outpatient care pathways.

Chatterjee, A., & Vartanian, O. (2014). Neuroaesthetics. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 18(7), 370–375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.03.003

Eisner, E. W. (2002). The arts and the creation of mind. Yale University Press.

Malchiodi, C. A. (Ed.). (2012). Handbook of art therapy (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Zeki, S. (1999). Inner vision: An exploration of art and the brain. Oxford University Press.