



Key facts

Centre for Armenian Information & Advice: Armenian Mental Wellbeing project

Ealing and West Hounslow, London

£25,422 of People's Health Trust funding, through Health Lottery London West

Main activities

Weekly art therapy sessions; one-to-one therapy

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Individual and collective action and control
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

People's Health Trust: Active Communities Case Study Armenian Mental Wellbeing Project, Centre for Armenian Information & Advice

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of participants, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

Drawing on interviews with projects leads, staff and the beneficiaries across two visits in Spring and Summer 2019, the case study explains how individuals have come together to shape and lead the [Armenian Mental Wellbeing project](#) and shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2018-19 Active Communities evaluation.

About the project

Immigration and its associated experiences can have a profound effect on individuals' mental health. Mental health remains a taboo subject in the Armenian community and Armenians in London face cultural and language barriers to service use, so they may often not access available services.

The Armenian Mental Wellbeing project was a new, two-year project providing weekly meetings for vulnerable and marginalised people from the Armenian community in Ealing and Hounslow in West London. The project was delivered by staff at the Centre for Armenian Information and Advice, and activities were developed based on their knowledge of the needs of service users at the Centre.

The project aimed to provide a safe and culturally familiar environment for members of the local Armenian community to speak openly, share their personal experiences and learn about mental health. It was hoped that participants would gain mutual support from their peers, develop their self-awareness and ultimately improve their confidence and resilience to manage challenging situations.

The project delivered two main activities: a weekly group session and some 1:1 therapy for a small number of individuals. The group sessions included emotional art therapy delivered by a volunteer psychiatrist, socialising and skills sharing. There were around 20 people enrolled and between 10-15 attended on a weekly basis.

How did local people shape and lead the project?

Participants were able to shape the weekly group sessions. They mostly contributed via informal conversation, both with each other and with the project's staff. Interviews with the project lead and facilitator showed that input from participants was an important element of project decision-making.

"Every session I ask them 'is there any topic you would like to cover next week?', and for example two weeks ago I asked what kind of session they would like and they suggested to have it in Gunnersbury Park." (Project facilitator)

Art therapy content was delivered by a volunteer psychiatrist, and participants felt able to steer the therapeutic conversation based on their experiences. Participants were also invited to discuss and voice ideas for thematic areas that they would like to cover in future art therapy sessions, to ensure that the sessions were tailored to their needs and preferences. The volunteer psychiatrist observed that participants had begun to direct the conversation themselves and would continue to do so.

"Every week, there isn't any agenda, the group always has a different dynamic. We can steer conversation and talk about experiences." (Participant)

At the time of the first visit, one participant had proposed the idea of a 'suggestions box' for members of the group to write down and submit their ideas during the weekly sessions. By the time of the second visit, the suggestions box had been implemented and was thought to be a useful tool for people to share ideas for discussion, without interrupting the current session. The project facilitator noted that not all suggestions made through the box were actionable, but that it had provided a useful opportunity to talk about participants' expectations and what the project could offer them.



What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

By bringing people from the local Armenian community together, weekly sessions enabled the development of social relationships between participants. At an individual level, participants described enjoying meeting new people and discussing various topics with people from different backgrounds. Importantly, the shared language and culture of participants facilitated connections both with each other and Armenian culture and tradition. Some participants had developed friendships to the point where they would meet up outside of the weekly activities.

Consistency in the regular attendees of the weekly group was considered important for making friends, building trust over time, and feeling comfortable enough to share emotional experiences. Both project staff and participants noted that participants had become increasingly confident in sharing their views with the group.

“People are more vibrant, they are more enthusiastic, I’ve noticed that the group is really evolving quickly.” (Participant)

At the time of the second visit, the project facilitator observed that the group were now more comfortable with one another and were willing to discuss topics that are typically ‘taboo’ in the Armenian community.

“Three weeks ago, we had a discussion about sexuality. If this age group, and from that background, they can sit and talk about sexuality, that is a great success to me... this generation, usually even if they know, they hide it. It came out, and then a few others started talking about it.” (Project facilitator)

At the group level, participants reported the development of soft social skills such as improved empathy, respect and trust for one another. It was observed that group members would occasionally disagree with one another, but that tolerance for other people’s views had generally increased over time.

“The other week, I was pissed off. Someone said something that I didn’t agree with and I didn’t want to talk about it. I had to ground myself because we are not all going to think the same way, we are not all religious, into politics... but we can all be open minded. It is helping me because I can be very controlling. I learnt to let go.” (Participant)

The impact of these social outcomes extends beyond the tone and content of project activities. For some participants, improved support and social skills developed from the group led to healthier, happier relationships outside of the group as well, indicating wider improvements in personal wellbeing.

Increased individual and collective action and control

Participants offered their views and ideas on how to improve project activities, mainly through informal suggestions. They had some control over the direction of the project, which was empowering.

“It is important that as members we feel we have freedom to choose what we want to do, and we allow each other that freedom as well.” (Participant)

“If they can learn to communicate and be open together, then they can take it out there and have higher confidence.”

(Project facilitator)



“It was positive to see that they are opening up, and they do share that in a place where they feel safe... I can see the difference, by attending on a regular or weekly basis, they do trust each other.”

(Project facilitator)

Participant case study

Amanda [alias] came from a background of abuse. She had social phobias and a lack of trust in others. Amanda felt safe within the group and became increasingly confident in sharing her ideas. Attending the group made a significant impact on Amanda's wellbeing.

Amanda had suggested setting up a WhatsApp chat for the group, but then discovered that not all group members understood how to use WhatsApp. She had the idea of running a skill-sharing group where she and other participants could share their knowledge, including delivering informal training in using technology. She spoke with the project facilitator and was able to use the venue at the Centre after weekly art therapy sessions had finished.

The first skill-sharing session was a success, and Amanda described positive personal outcomes. Amanda's ability to take initiative by designing and leading on a new element of the project had clear positive outcomes at an individual level. She described both increased happiness, empowerment and self-worth as a result.

"Never mind my rheumatoid arthritis, I was skipping like a bunny rabbit, it felt really good that I could help someone else... It's the fact that they can trust me."

Amanda believed that the skill-share activity would allow more participants to feel empowered and that the sessions could give participants a sense of ownership over project activities. By the time of the second visit, Amanda had not had enough time to formalise the skills sharing sessions but described how participants had naturally continued to share skills with one another as they got to know each other. Amanda was taking on board suggestions from the group so that they too could benefit from sharing their skills and shaping project activities.

"I totally feel that it is for our personal development. Feeling a sense of worth, that we are not just victims. We have something to offer the world and others want what we have, it is overwhelming."

Participants took the initiative to start offering skill-sharing sessions after the weekly art therapy sessions, although the project facilitator attended these sessions. At the time of the second visit, there had been a participant-led session demonstrating how to do manicures. The project facilitator was impressed that a male participant stayed behind for this session, demonstrating that the groups exposed participants to new skills and experiences that they may not otherwise have had. There had been interest from participants in running further sessions related to cooking, knitting, and sports.

"Everyone is going to bring something of themselves and give." (Participant)

The expert presence of the project facilitator was hugely valuable to the support of participants' mental wellbeing. This delivery structure did require a strongly-led approach to activities however, which may have been limiting in terms of participants taking collective control over aspects of their lives, being empowered to take collective action, and using their new social links, confidence and skills to support their collective action. However, participant-led activities were attempted, supported and encouraged during the funding period.

"Today [participant] came to me and said 'after the meeting, can you help me sort out my phone'. Already that is half an hour of a skill I can share to help someone else."

(Participant)



"Participants can decide how they want to shape the activities, so they feel they have ownership. This can have a positive impact on their confidence and self-esteem. They bring their ideas."

(Project facilitator)

Increased confidence, knowledge and skills

One participant described how, prior to attending the group, they had not spoken the Armenian language since they were a teenager. Within the group, they had felt able to practice speaking Armenian without being judged and returned to fluency. Others also joined the group with minimal understanding of the language but learnt to express themselves with more confidence.

The participant interviews highlighted that Armenians may struggle to trust others due to historical events including the Armenian Genocide. The same events led to Armenian communities settling in different countries across the world, and participants described preconceived ideas about Armenians from different countries. Those who attended the group originated from many different countries, and some developed their knowledge and understanding of various Armenian cultures, as well as of unifying factors that bring them together as a group.

“There used to be a really closed-minded concept/belief that this community is different from that community... and we are talking about the same Armenians. And here we are, unifying. It is almost revolutionary.” (Participant)

A number said that they previously lacked trust in others, but had gained confidence since joining the group and felt able to trust anyone in the group. Importantly, this meant that participants were more comfortable talking about personal and mental health issues that are typically taboo in Armenian culture. The art therapy sessions in particular encouraged participants to manage and communicate their emotions effectively, in order to promote healing. One participant described how the art therapy sessions had taught them not to brush feelings under the carpet, but to talk about them instead. This person consequently felt more able to process and talk about past experiences, which contributed to their improved mental wellbeing.

The volunteer psychiatrist who delivers the art therapy sessions agreed they had observed that, over time, participants have become more confident in telling their stories.

“In my [Armenian] society, it is very deep-rooted that people prefer to say ‘I’m alright’. They normally don’t talk. That is why I was quite surprised that they were talking. So for me, that was a very big achievement.” (Volunteer)

Longer-term outcomes

The project was in its early stages at the time of the research and it was too soon to observe the longer-term outcomes.

Based on the project’s work so far, the project facilitator said that the increased confidence of participants may lead to their increased likelihood of finding employment. Outcomes related to social connections and collective control may contribute to confidence and empowerment, and these will likely help participants to believe in themselves and potentially to perform better at a job interview.

The Centre has an advice service which the project facilitator can refer participants to, and it may be that participants can go on to receive practical support for their CVs or to receive signposting to other relevant organisations, to help them with their individual longer-term outcomes.

“But in these sessions I learn that nothing is shameful.”

(Participant)



“It’s quite important because it’s connecting them to where they come from. They feel like they found a second family.”

(Project facilitator)

What has worked well?

- **The project brought together members of the local Armenian community.** The case study evidence suggests that the targeted nature of the project was successful in bringing people from the local Armenian community together. This led to positive outcomes that are specific to this minority group. The shared emotional and cultural experiences of this community created a unique setting where participants were able to share their stories, overcome issues of trust, and experience emotional healing. Over time, this led to participants becoming increasingly confident and able to better communicate, including in the Armenian language.
- **Participants increased their collective control over the project.** Skill-sharing sessions initiated by one participant demonstrated the increasing capacity of participants to share and action their ideas to ultimately shape the direction of project activities. The nature of these sessions also meant that those delivering the sessions could feel empowered by sharing their knowledge, while all participants were gaining new skills. If the sessions continued to run and were entirely volunteer led, interviewees hoped this would contribute to the sustainability of the project beyond the end of the funding.



What are the lessons?

- **Leadership is important for the project.** The project facilitator was a key leadership figure for the activities, delivering one-to-one therapy sessions, and facilitating discussions during art therapy sessions. Although delivering a valuable service, this person's central role could potentially limit collective control and even affect the sustainability of project outcomes beyond the funded period. At the time of the first case study visit, some participants were beginning to volunteer and support group facilitation, but not consistently. There had been a few instances when the project facilitator was unwell and participants had volunteered to facilitate discussion during the art therapy sessions. However, the professional expertise of the project facilitator was thought to be key for navigating these sometimes emotional conversations.

The future

At the time of the case study visits, there was not yet a concrete plan for how project activities would continue once the funding period had ended. The project facilitator hoped that there would be enough reliable volunteers to deliver some activities for current participants and newcomers. However, funding for expert facilitation of art therapy sessions was considered important. The project facilitator was hoping to be able to offer placements to young people in the community studying psychology and counselling. Placements such as shadowing therapy sessions could enable these individuals to lead the therapy in either an employed or volunteer capacity, once qualified.

Strong social ties developed between group participants are strong, and it was anticipated that many of these friendships could continue in the long term.

“My hope would be that, they are a family now, and they can sustain that relationship and stay together, even outside this venue.” (Project facilitator)

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(Project facilitator)