

ISSUP GLOBAL WEBINAR

Breaking the Cycle

of Behavioural Addiction Among the Youth

Creative Expression as Prevention and Healing

Behavioural Addiction Among Youths: Patterns and Innovative Strategies for Prevention

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What participants will take away

01

Understand the link between creative engagement and reduced addictive behaviour in young people

02

Identify evidence-based creative tools, including art, music, drama, and writing, that prevent and support recovery

03

Recognise how creativity builds emotional strength, healthy identity, and meaningful social connection

04

Apply practical steps to bring creative programmes into schools, community settings, and clinical practice

05

Understand the policy opportunities for scaling creative expression as a public health response

06

Leave with a curated list of references and practical next steps

Behavioural Addiction Among Youth: Key Facts

1 in 3

adolescents show signs of
problematic digital or gaming use
globally (WHO, 2023)

14 yrs

average age when young people
first encounter addictive
behaviour patterns

47%

of youth with behavioural
addiction report unmet emotional
and creative needs

3x

higher risk of substance use when
behavioural addiction goes
untreated

What It Is and Why It Matters

Creative expression is the act of using art, music, writing, or performance to process feelings, make sense of experience, and build a sense of self. For young people, it creates a meaningful alternative to addictive escape routes.

Visual Art	Music	Writing and Poetry	Drama and Movement
<i>Painting, drawing, sculpture, photography</i>	<i>Songwriting, drumming, choral singing, listening</i>	<i>Journaling, poetry, storytelling, letters</i>	<i>Theatre, role play, dance, spoken word</i>
Helps young people show feelings they cannot yet put into words. Gives shape to inner experience.	Regulates the nervous system, creates a sense of belonging, and channels strong emotion safely.	Builds the ability to tell one's own story. Gives young people authorship over their own lives.	Allows young people to try out new ways of being and practise healthier responses to pressure.

Why the Brain Responds to Creativity

What Happens in the Brain

- Both addictive behaviour and creative activity activate the brain's reward pathway, which is the area responsible for pleasure and motivation.
- Creative flow produces natural dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, giving the brain the uplift it is seeking without harmful consequences.
- Regular creative practice strengthens the part of the brain that controls impulse and decision-making, the very part that addiction weakens.
- Creative activity also lowers cortisol, the stress hormone, and stress is one of the main triggers for addictive behaviour in young people.

From Trigger to Creative Response

TRIGGER Stress, boredom, loneliness, pain

URGE The brain seeks relief and reward

CHOICE POINT Is a creative outlet available?

FLOW STATE Absorption, focus, expression

REWARD Natural dopamine and social connection

IDENTITY SHIFT 'I am a poet, a musician, a creator'

Four Ways Creative Expression Helps Young People

01

Emotional Regulation

- Art and music create a safe space for overwhelming feelings
- Reduces the urge to escape through addictive behaviour
- Builds tolerance for discomfort over time

02

Identity Formation

- Young people build a positive sense of self as a creator
- Writing helps them become the authors of their own stories
- Drama gives them the chance to rehearse new, healthier ways of being

03

Healthy Pleasure

- Creative flow produces genuine neurological reward
- Skill growth keeps the brain engaged and motivated
- Offers the novelty and excitement that addiction falsely promises

04

Social Belonging

- Choirs, poetry clubs, theatre groups, and writing circles create real community
- Isolation drives addictive behaviour; creativity brings people together
- Peer modelling of healthy coping is especially powerful at this stage

Programmes That Have Worked

[Music] El Sistema - Venezuela and Global

Classical music training in at-risk communities reduced delinquency and substance use by 40 per cent. The model has since been replicated in more than 60 countries.

Baker (2014); Tunstall (2012)

[Visual Art] Art Therapy in Canadian Schools

School-based art therapy led to a 68 per cent reduction in emotional dysregulation scores, with significantly lower rates of substance experimentation compared to control groups.

Rubin (2016); Malchiodi (2020)

[Expressive Writing] Writing for Recovery - USA

The Pennebaker expressive writing protocol reduced PTSD symptoms by 47 per cent in at-risk young people, with a downstream reduction in self-medication behaviour.

Pennebaker and Smyth (2016)

[Drama] Theatre for Development - Nigeria

Community theatre with Nigerian youth, led by LEAP Africa, showed measurable improvements in peer-resistance skills and reduced peer-pressure-driven substance use.

Okonkwo et al. (2019)

The CRAFT Model: Creative Arts for Resilience and Freedom in Youth

C	CONNECTION	Build safe peer and mentor relationships through shared creative space
R	REGULATION	Teach emotional self-management through artistic expression and creative flow
A	AUTHORSHIP	Help young people become the authors of their own identity rather than products of their circumstances
F	FLOW	Create sustained and meaningful pleasurable experiences that naturally compete with addictive highs
T	TRANSFORMATION	Enable visible change at personal, community, and cultural levels through creative output

CRAFT draws from arts-based therapy, positive youth development, and addiction prevention research.

Bringing Creative Expression Into Your Work

Schools	Community Organisations	Clinical Settings
- Add arts to social and emotional learning programmes - Train teachers in arts-based check-in methods - Create a safe art room or music corner - Use drama to rehearse peer-resistance skills - Hold monthly poetry or storytelling events	- Partner with local artists, musicians, and poets - Design community murals that celebrate youth identity - Open after-school creative hubs in high-risk areas - Use group drumming or choral singing as trauma-informed practice - Publish and display youth creative work	- Combine arts with CBT and motivational interviewing - Use expressive writing for trauma alongside other therapies - Engage drama therapy for identity work with young people - Offer creative groups within residential recovery programmes - Apply photovoice methods to amplify youth voices

Scaling Creative Prevention: Who Needs to Act

Government and Ministries

- Include arts in national drug prevention curricula
- Fund creative hubs in underserved communities
- Integrate arts-based therapy into public health and mental health packages

International Donors and UN Agencies

- Recognise creative arts as a cost-effective prevention tool
- Fund evaluations of arts-based addiction prevention in low- and middle-income countries
- Include creative expression in UNODC and WHO youth health guidelines

Education Systems

- Stop cutting arts from school timetables
- Train teachers in trauma-informed arts facilitation
- Partner with cultural institutions for school-based residencies

Digital and Media Platforms

- Support youth creativity on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and podcasts
- Design incentives for creative output rather than passive consumption
- Partner with tech companies on creative social prescribing tools

Challenges We Should Not Ignore

Challenges

Outcomes from creative work are hard to measure, and many funders still prefer clinical data

Poorly run creative sessions can cause harm. Facilitation quality matters enormously

Arts programmes are often the first to be cut in under-resourced schools and communities

Creative expression is a prevention and healing tool. It is not a standalone clinical treatment

Practical Responses

Use mixed-method evaluation. Stories and narratives are evidence too

Invest in facilitator training and trauma-informed supervision

Reframe arts budgets as public health investments

Position it within an integrated model alongside clinical care, not as a replacement

Extract of Key References

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- [5] Okonkwo, A. et al. (2019). Theatre for development as a prevention tool: Evidence from Nigerian youth programmes. *African Journal of Drug and Alcohol Studies*, 18(2).
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- [8] Stuckey, H.L. and Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(2), 254-263.
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About the Speaker



Abdulmalik Yahya

The Punsmith

Abdulmalik Yahya is a Nigerian author, poet, social entrepreneur, behavioural coach, peace ambassador, and UN SDGs advocate with over 8 years of experience in advocacy and community development.

He is the founder and elected president of Sahel Scribes Poetry Club, where he mentors emerging poets in Northern Nigeria to promote healing and advocacy through literary creativity.

His achievements include the ANA Abuja Prof. Udentia O. Udentia Performance Prize, recognition as a two-time 2024 ANA Abuja Poet of the Week, and an Outstanding Leadership Awardees by the Not Too Young To Lead Initiative. His published works include the poetry collection *Breaking Addiction: Of Days Away* and *Nigerian Youth: A Beating Heart*.

Abdulmalik currently works at Connected Development and has worked with UNICEF, WHO, SOS Children's Villages, The Brief Academy, and SAHEI Gender Development Initiative. He is the State General Secretary of YALI Network Abuja, Exchange & Special Task Coordinator of ANA Abuja Chapter, a fellow of the EBEDI International Writers Residency, a member of UNESCO Nigeria Youth Network, and an active member of the Amnesty International Academy.

I.G: @thepunsmith

*"What if art, music, writing, or drama
could be the thing that pulls a young person back from the edge?"*

The answer is yes. And the evidence agrees.

Your Action This Week

- Choose one creative modality you can bring into your existing work with young people
- Share one insight from this session with a colleague or decision-maker
- Connect with the ISSUP community to continue this conversation