

# Changing Arts and Minds

A Survey of Health and Wellbeing in the  
Creative Sector



## **Executive Summary**

This report offers a view of the mental health and wellbeing of those who work in the creative industries, primarily, but not exclusively resident in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. It has uncovered some health and wellbeing concerns for which the sector and wider society need to take some responsibility. Mental health issues, substance use, suicidality were prevalent; but so too, there is evidence of hope and resilience in the sector that can be built upon.

## **Methodology Summary**

The report is based on the findings from a study of 574 people who work in the creative sector. The questionnaire comprised of a range of questions to assess levels of mental health problems and address the factors known to impact on mental health and well-being. It included fixed response and open-ended questions on individuals' background, general and mental health, help seeking, substance use, and questions specific to the creative sector environment. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the School of Psychology Filter Committee at Ulster University. The survey was hosted online and was available for the purposes of this report for all members of the industry from July to November 2017. The study was advertised through arts organisations across Ireland. Individuals at these organisations were contacted on their publicly available email addresses and asked to promote the survey via email or social media. Over 200 organisations were contacted and the survey was promoted via social media and through the organisations involved.

## Key findings:

- Our participants described how their creative output can be uniquely personal, often arising through the processing of their own life experiences, including pain, suffering, and vulnerability.

However the conditions of the working environment and the lack of appropriate recognition of the value of the work is conducive to stress and mental health difficulties. As one participant so eloquently put it:

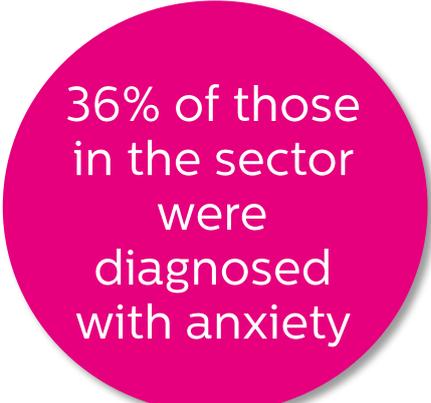
*"I concluded that in order to progress as an artist that it was necessary to embrace one's shadow and to allow a dialogue between conscious and unconscious. This I concluded, may make the artist very vulnerable and that this should be acknowledged in art colleges etc. The creative process I believe can stir up mental health issues."*

- Specific characteristics of the creative sector work environment were reported as contributing to the likelihood of developing mental health problems. Examples included pressure to reach high standards (both externally and internally), irregular work (including contracts, financial security, irregular hours, and working outside the sector), the perceived lack of value placed on their work and the inadequate financial rewards for the work.
- Despite these difficulties the majority reported having hope, and most considered themselves happy. Around two-thirds spoke of hope for the future (67.3%) or expected to have many more positive than negative experiences in the next three to five years.



63% spoke  
of hope for  
the future

- On average the alcohol use of those working in the creative sector put those at risk of alcohol related harm; there was evidence that some creative sector workers were being paid in alcohol, and that drug use in the past year was more common than in the general population (46.5%).
- Over 20% of those in the creative sector are being paid at a level which is below the poverty line.
- The likelihood of a mental health problem in the sector is three times that of the general population. The most common diagnosed disorders were anxiety (36%) and depression (32%).



36% of those  
in the sector  
were  
diagnosed  
with anxiety

- High proportions (60%) reported having had suicidal thoughts, 37% had made a plan for suicide and 16% had made a suicide attempt in their lifetime.

16% had made a suicide attempt in their lifetime

63% could admit they had a mental health, alcohol and or drug problem

88.5% would talk to their friend

- Around 36% of those had visited their GP for a mental health problem in the past year. Whilst most people said they felt they could admit that they had a mental health, alcohol, or drug problem (63%), those who were concerned about disclosure cited workplace factors, personal factors, service provision and stigma as reasons for not revealing that they had a problem. The vast majority, 88.5% said they would talk to their friend if they were worried about their friend's mental health.

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## Consequently, we make the following six recommendations

1. Work Environment, pay and conditions
2. Emotional support and accessing mental health services
3. The role of drugs and alcohol
4. Treatments for anxiety, depression, and suicidality
5. Curriculum development
6. Funding and recognition of the role of the sector

### 1. Work environment, pay and conditions

A cultural shift within creative organizations large and small is required to improve the work environment and provide a kinder, more supportive and less stressful, culture across the sector. Groups who represent those working in the creative industries, groups of workers themselves, and indeed employers should work together to ensure that the working conditions and financial recompense is appropriate. The commitments made by governments should and need to be enacted. We need strong leadership in both political and other arenas, to promote the value of the arts and the people who work in them and change the cultural narrative around the importance of the creative sector.

## **2. Emotional support and accessing mental health services**

Consideration should also be given to ways that employer assistance programmes could be expanded to include people working in the creative sector who do not have fixed contracts. Service providers should have an understanding of the pressures of working in the industry in order to appropriately meet their needs. Online, computerized and telephone support services may be of particular value in this sector. Packages and social media groups may connect people and provide social support for stress and mental health/ substance issues. Online, or computerised treatments, with or without, adjunct person to person therapeutic contact, may be helpful for those who are travelling, or who do not wish to attend face to face treatment sessions.

## **3. The role of drugs and alcohol**

It is recommended that we build awareness of the effects of substance use amongst those in the creative industry, focusing particularly on the impact on creativity and health. There should be adequate support including both harm reduction programs and treatment support for those who have more severe problems, and that services are equipped to meet the specific needs of those in the creative industries with an understanding of the nature of the working environment. Cultural factors which encourage or facilitate substance use, such as part payment in alcohol, should be challenged.

## **4. Treatments for anxiety, depression, and suicidality**

In order to be effective for this population, psychological services need to have an understanding of the creative industries. Links with treatment and support services need to be developed, along with targeted interventions, and these need to be widely publicized to those working in the creative sector. These need to be readily available, confidential, and easy to access given the nature of the field. Tailored support and early intervention is required to tackle suicidality in the sector. Consideration should be given to the provision of particular support services to meet the needs of people in the creative sector at particular times of the year, and with particular issues. For example: help with tax returns prior to the deadlines, debt management and financial issues, such as getting a mortgage, managing family life and unstable/ unpredictable work patterns, and building personal resilience.

## 5. Curriculum development

Those involved in teaching in the arts should build in classes which identify risk and protective factors, identifying and strengthening social networks, create an understanding of the pitfalls, highlight resources available, and provide protective strategies. Those who teach should be supported to develop this knowledge. Short courses for those already in the sector to help build resilience may be helpful, and as such they should be invested in, and should be widely available.

## 6. Funding and recognition of the role of the sector

As a society we claim to value the arts, but only those artists who are well known appear to be paid in a way that acknowledges their contribution. There is a responsibility for all of us who consume the arts, and benefit from the arts, in whatever guise, to recognize the people who create the art first and foremost. Artists deserve the same rights to flourish and grow, and they should receive appropriate payment for their hard work and output. Similarly, payment in alcohol or other ‘incentives’ such as ‘increasing exposure’ is inappropriate. Investment in a sector which provides £10 return for every £1 spent should be a priority for governments North and South, and the commitments to the creative sector can only be realized if we take care of those who work in it.

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Finally, we leave with a quote from one of our participants:

*“I hope that it lights a spark  
in the industry”*

This is our sincere hope too. The evidence has illustrated a need to act on the mental health and wellbeing in the sector, and we invite all of those who read the report, both inside and outside of the sector to make their contribution to a healthy, vibrant creative sector by implementing the recommendations above.

