I am -The First Fortnight: Challenging Mental Health Stigma through Creative Arts

*“Can you not feel this? Do my words not make you feel something. Can you not feel the grip of my words around you, the love in my full stops? Stops, spots, where I had to stop. Does it help you to not stop? Does it allow you to feel? Tell me it does. Because I cannot do the smallness sometimes, the economy and weather. This is more than that. I am giving you my familiarity, my fluency, my sisterhood. “Questions- Michelle O’Connor*

If you cannot draw, paint or sing the word creativity can cause a distance between us like a sea. Creativity can be inaccurately identified with certain realms of expression which cast others aside. I myself can relate to this. I cannot draw, I cannot paint, I attempt singing to no avail.

For years I had accepted this, I am not a creative person. I viewed talent shows and would deliberate my performance in front of Simon and argued with myself that I could not simply stand there and speak. ‘That is not showbiz’ everything must be bigger, better, more wow. I nearly grieved this part of me, an ambiguous loss for something I never had or held. It is only in recent years I have claimed this part of myself. I now offer this to you too, to claim your art and creativity.

Since a young age I have written in a journal, I have written many blogs, I have written poetry. Even when I do not write, I am creative in my expression and translation of thoughts, ideas and feelings. That must count for something, right? That is maybe our first mistake, we sometimes need verification or permission to allow us claim to be something. I am creative, I am an artist, I am. However, we then need to show proof of this, we need an award, we need a book, we need a stamp on our door, portfolios where our peers can attest that we are indeed what we claim. But who is the judge and jury of this, when can we reclaim ‘I am’.

We feel like fraudsters if we claim it and in truth I have not written in my journal for 6 months now, I am a runner- I have not run in 3 weeks because I can’t bring myself to put on my runners, I am a poet, but no-one has ever read a word. I am, I am, I am. ‘I am’ helps with mental health. Being creative, having the space to be creative in other ways than the status quo and recognising this, is imperative and this is what the ethos of the first fortnight is.

The First Fortnight allows us to explore this creativity and how this allows our mental health to improve or highlight our struggles through this medium. Dr Pat Braken of Mental health services Cork reaffirms work, relationships, the creative arts, recreation, peer support, religion and spirituality can be pathways for recovery with mental health issues.

*“Your art is not about how many people like your work. Your art is about if your heart likes your work. If your soul likes your work. It’s about how honest you are with yourself and you must never trade honesty for relatability” Rupi Kaur*

EmployAbility Limerick is establishing this blog, to create a space to communicate our stories, from staff, from clients, from employers. ‘There are powerful social dimensions made possible by online collaborations’-Gauntlett. This blog will allow us to collaborate and connect with an online community for which it aims to benefit and contribute to. Creativity has been cited by Martinez (2017) as a strategy for mental health.

EmployAbility Limerick supports people with mental health issues and a wide variety of injuries and disabilities to secure and maintain employment. Employment regardless of professions and careers allows individuals to express creativity through connection with co-workers, constructing a building, painting a house, assembling a medical device.

Amnesty Ireland International and Mental Health Reform in a report on employment and mental health cite employment as a major determinant for good mental health and for recovery of mental health problems. Further to this, this report echoes the valued contribution persons with mental health conditions can make to themselves in terms of recovery and their wider community. When this does not occur, or employment opportunities are not presented, Irish society faces a loss of creative talent and determination of all its members.

My father used to make up stories as I went to sleep, my mother talks and supports women for a living, you walk your dog every night. We are being creative in your own language that speaks to you and maintains you. It maintains your breath. Assisting people in being creative and contribute in the workforce enables us to continue this creativity outside of this event. However we need collaboration to continue this project to ensure the talent is not lost in our society due to the stigma of mental health issues.

*“Creative people are comfortable with ambiguity, openness and bring a different set of questions”*

The first fortnight is an initiative run by Festival of Arts to incorporate the arts into the conversation of mental health with the Irish Times referring to it as ‘where art meets mental health’.

Established in 2010 by David Keegan who stated for the Irish Times (2015) that the festival is ‘challenging social consciousness around mental health’.

For further questions about the EmployAbility service please contact 061 493095