

MAGYAR GERONTOLÓGIA

15. ÉVFOLYAM KONFERENCIA KÜLÖNSZÁM

2023. 15. évf. Konferencia Különszám

On-line verzió: ISSN 2062-3690

[www.https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/gerontologia](https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/gerontologia)

Culture on Prescription in Portugal: cultural experiences promoting health in lonely people and older adults

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Keywords: lonely people, older adult, Culture on Prescription in Europe, Erasmus+, art, culture, social isolation

Social connections play a vital role in personal well-being. Loneliness, characterized by a lack of meaningful social engagement, has emerged as a significant public health concern in Europe, especially after COVID19 pandemic, when the problem was labelled by the media as a “loneliness epidemic” (Berlingieri et al., 2022). According to Casabianca & Kovacic (2022), older adults are especially vulnerable to loneliness due to all the life transitions and disruptive life events they face. Loneliness is more prevalent among Europeans aged 50 and above in southern and eastern regions (ranging from 31% to 46%) compared to western and northern areas (ranging from 10% to 30%).

Loneliness and isolation can adversely affect human health, potentially causing depression, hypertension, disrupted sleep, physiological reactions to stress, and an elevated risk of mortality

(Brown et al,2018; Cacioppo et al. 2002; Cacioppo et al. 2006; Hawkley et al., 2006; Holwerda et al. 2012; Shiovitz-Ezra et al., 2010). Moreover, loneliness has negative impacts in the communities, societies, health care and economic fields.

‘Culture on Prescription in Europe’ is an Erasmus+ project designed to counteract social isolation and loneliness using art and culture. This involves healthcare professionals referring isolated individuals, particularly older adults, to local artistic and cultural opportunities. Rooted in the successful "social prescribing" model from the UK and Ireland, it advocates for "prescribing" artistic and social experiences to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. Social Prescribing has emerged as an intervention of looking after people's health and well-being through non-clinical measures in their local communities. This approach facilitates healthcare practitioners like GPs, nurses, and others in referring individuals that are facing difficulties such as loneliness, isolation, or mental health problems to various community-based, local, and non-clinical programs and services (White and O’Kelly, 2022). Although this preventative approach is still developing in many areas, regions that have formally integrated social prescribing into their national health strategies show strong partnerships between the community, voluntary sectors and health services.

Cultural prescribing is “the referral of a healthcare professional of lonely and isolated older people to locally available art and cultural offerings” (White & O’Kelly, 2022, p.11), and is the basis of the Erasmus+ project 'Culture on Prescription in Europe'. The project is developing a training tool for adults and facilitators to address issues of loneliness; it will delve into methods and guidelines for employing individualized 'cultural prescriptions' to engage in fresh and customized activities. But also, to disseminate information about a proven and tested strategy for tackling mental health issues using concrete data, statistics, and examples of successful implementation, which can be adapted and implemented in European regions where Social Prescribing initiatives are still limited.

To develop the training tool, pilot courses were implemented in Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, Portugal and Romania, where artists from different areas worked with groups of people to promote the social interaction as well as develop competences in different art and cultural fields.

The authors will present the main aims and results of the pilot course in Portugal and its connection with the training tool result.

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