

Enrichment of Prevention Methodologies with Self-help/Mutual Aid Practices: The case of the Centre of Prevention of Addictions and Promotion of Psychosocial Health in Larissa-OKANA, Greece

Dr Eirini Koufaki (Centre for the Prevention of Addictions – OKANA)

Dr Andreas Almpanis (Workshop of Life)

Dr Sotiris Lainas (Self-Help Promotion Program)

(As it has been presented in the conference: The Art of Healing: A new era in substance use prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery support” in Thessaloniki, on Thursday 27 June 2024)

Slide No1 (Opening slide)

Thank you very much for being here!

We are very happy to share our experience with colleagues from all over the world that work in the community field.

Slide No2 (Centre of the Prevention of Addictions – Larissa / OKANA)

The Centre for the Prevention of Addictions and the Promotion of psychosocial Health is one of the 75 Prevention Centers around Greece, one in each region of Greece and more than one in Athens and Thessaloniki.

They are funded by the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Health and are supervised by OKANA (the Organization Against Drugs)

Their main mission is to implement interventions of universal, selective and indicative prevention.

More specifically, in terms of universal prevention, we focus on creating supportive networks in the community.

The Centre’s basic aims are:

The Prevention of Addictions, not only addictive substances but addictive behaviors, as well, such as gambling and Internet).

The Promotion of Psychosocial Health (learning personal and social skills) in three main fields – family, school, community and

Counselling (8-10 sessions), not only in drug related issues but also in adolescence, divorce, loss etc.

Slide No3 (Workshop of Life)

Since 2015, the Prevention Centre of Larissa has created an innovative prevention body, named the Workshop of Life.

The Workshop of Life is funded by the region of Thessaly and OKANA, and is scientifically supervised by the Prevention Centre of Larissa.

The idea is to form experiential groups of children from the age of 6, adolescents and adults that can choose one of the following thematic.

It combines various forms of art (photography, literature, dance, theatre, music creative writing, visual arts) along with history, civilization, voluntary work, with the basic assumptions of Prevention science.

The facilitators of the groups are always two: a social scientist and an artist, depending on the type of the group.

This way, people can engage in photography or literature and at the same time, learn to function in a group, learn how to connect with other people, how to cope with rejection or conflict and finally build functional relationships, an all these in an experiential and amusing way.

Since 2018, the Workshop of Life has been engaged to selective and indicative prevention interventions to different populations: prisoners, Roma people, women who suffered domestic violence, people with chronic illness, parents whose children face special needs, teachers who work with children who face special needs, and refugees.

During the same year, the Workshop of Life was awarded the Pompidou Prevention Prize as one of the three most innovative and successful prevention projects in Europe, and in 2022, the video that describes the way the Workshop of Life functions, has won the Impact Award and the People's Choice Award during the Lisbon Addictions 2022 Conference.

Slide No4 (The need of the cooperation)

When the Workshop of Life started to operate, in 2015, our biggest fear was that people won't participate in our groups.

Seven years later, it became clear that the problem was the complete opposite. People don't want to leave our groups, although they have been participating for more than 5 – 6 years. At the beginning, it was flattering but after a while, we came across all the dangers.

First of all, we realized that senior participants perceive the group as theirs, preventing the newer members to integrate. The facilitators stood

a little bit uncertain in front of that assumption, not really knowing what to do.

Secondly, some of the prevention groups were slowly evolving into informal psychotherapy groups. Meeting the same 8-10 people in a stable hour and day, with a facilitator someone who is a social scientist, can end to a non-formal group of psychotherapy.

Additionally, our objective is to reach as many people from our community as possible, so we thought that we had to do something in order to renew our members.

At the same time, the main organization, the Prevention Centre of Larissa, has already begun the process of turning a teachers' group conducted by one of our colleagues, into a self-managed group.

Traditionally, the teachers' group are conducted by a sociologist or psychologist of the Prevention Centre and they deal with issues of class dynamics, relationships between parents and teachers, school bullying, communication skills etc.

The results were encouraging. Teachers were empowered to work by themselves and transform their group to a mutual aid group, where they can give and receive support, in issues that have to do with the challenges they face in school.

Slide No5 (Why Self-Help/Mutual Aid methodology?)

In order to address the previously mentioned risks without excluding the long-lasting members, we started in 2021 to examine the idea of developing self-managed adult groups according to the principles of mutual aid groups.

This idea had several advantages:

- There was already very promising evidence from the operation of the teachers group.
- During the 1st lockdown of covid-19 (March-June 2020) when the Workshop of Life closed and did not coordinate any of its 33 groups, many of the senior members took the initiative and created short-lived, online, self-managed groups following the methodology of the Workshop of Life, without facilitators.
- The self-managed groups we intended to create, would provide a safe transitional framework for long-standing members who would have to leave their existing groups. Their exclusion from the groups alone would have broken the trust that had been built up over the years with the Prevention Centre and the Workshop of Life.
- The new groups could be multipliers of the basic principles of prevention in the wider community through the activity they would develop.

- There was already a trustful cooperation with the Self-Help Promotion Programme of Larissa, which could train trainers and social scientists in the principles of Mutual aid groups and supervise scientifically the new project.

Slide No6 (Self-Help Promotion Program)

The Self-Help Promotion Program is an ongoing Aristotle University of Thessaloniki project that aims to the confrontation / prevention of addiction and other psychosocial problems. It constitutes a hybrid organization based on self-help / mutual aid methodologies, that uses both health professionals/social scientists and service users to all the phases of intervening (needs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation of intervention).

Slide No7 (What did we plan to do?)

We initially held several meetings with the deputy scientific director of the Self-Help Promotion Program to design the methodology, and the team of trainers from the Prevention Centre and the Workshop of Life was formed.

We organized an open event in Larissa and shared to the wider community the idea of development of self-managed groups at the Prevention Center and the Workshop of Life.

The team of trainers was trained by the team of the Self-help Promotion Program on the basic principles, methods and practices of Self-help/Mutual aid groups (active participation, communication, equality, parallel role of members as aid receivers & aid providers, democratic operation, definition of common challenges- topics-actions, role rotation, non-profit orientation).

We trained 3 self-managed groups in this methodology, with the aim of gradually letting them operate autonomously.

Regular supervision meetings with the whole team of trainers were implemented under the coordination of the scientific director of the Prevention Centre and the deputy scientific director of the Self-Help Promotion Program.

Slide No8 (Results / practical)

The results of our program can be divided into two categories: (a) practical results (b) theoretical results.

Two of the three groups we trained completed the course we had planned. The 2nd adult group of the Workshop of Life decided in March 2024, upon completion of its training, to self-dissolve.

One development that pleasantly surprised us is that four other groups with former Workshop of Life members have been formed and are

currently operating independently. These groups self-organized in 2023 after the termination of some adult groups that had been operating since 2015 in the creative writing topic. Our team has been following their development and has implemented meetings with their members for research purposes.

Slide No9 (Results / theoretical)

Regarding the lessons learned, i.e. the theoretical results of the program, they can be summarized as follows:

The main element that keeps groups together is the development of strong interpersonal relationships, the sense of belonging and the common culture that emerges in the group. Several participants have confessed that their lives are divided into two parts: before their participation and after their participation in the groups at the Prevention Centre and the Workshop of Life. By this, they mean that their lives have changed because of the community they joined.

The topic of the group is also important. The groups we trained temporarily expressed feelings of frustration and fear because the thematic and group activities were not proposed by the trainers but were their own responsibility. These feelings gradually subsided and disappeared once the groups had established their character. Also, members of self-organised creative writing groups agree that their shared love of writing is a link in the group, but not the primary one.

Perhaps we put more than we should have on creating a safe transition framework for the previous members of the Workshop of Life. What we noticed is that the smoother the transition, the less autonomy and self-organization the team experiences. Transition also entails the loss of security. In the future we should have more confidence in the members of the previous groups that they will be able to take the next step independently.

The training of prevention professionals in the methodology of the Self-Help/Mutual Aid groups has particularly increased their skills in the field of prevention.

Finally, the role, theoretical background and self-discipline of the trainers of the self-managed groups are crucial. It is not uncommon for the trainers to be flattered by the influence they have on the groups and the effectiveness of their actions in gradually building trust and relationships within the group. They should, however, maintain their role, which is temporary and peripheral to the group.

Slide No10 (Wider application and benefits potential)

In conclusion, we would like to highlight two main potentials for the innovative adaptation of the methodologies of self-help / mutual aid groups in the field of prevention.

For community use, a similar model can be applied, where experts intervene in an integrated way in collaboration with the community, train the community in the model and the principles of self-management in an experiential way and gradually leave the field, keeping only their role of supervision and continuous re-education of the community.

Also, an opportunity for prevention professionals to broaden their role perspective, to be retrained in community approaches, to develop more horizontal relationships with citizens and communities, recognizing that beyond scientific knowledge, equally important is the experiential knowledge and the benefits generated by peer dynamics.

Slide No11 (Closing slide)

Thank you for your attention.

Contact:

Centre of Prevention of Addictions and Promotion of Psychosocial Health
in Larissa- OKANA & Workshop of Life: kplarisa@otenet.gr
Larissa Self-Help Promotion Program: larisa@selfhelp.gr