

Detailed Report: Preparatory Meeting for the Erasmus+ Project "Tackling Self-Stigma Together (TSST)"

Event Date: 30.01.2025 to 02.02.2025

Location: Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia

Project Reference: 2024-1-PL01-KA210-YOU-000244391

Introduction:

The preparatory meeting for the Erasmus+ project "*Tackling Self-Stigma Together*" (TSST), organized by Xanadu Art, was held in Ohrid, North Macedonia, from January 30 to February 2, 2025. This gathering represented a pivotal moment in an ongoing international effort to address the stigma associated with mental health, particularly self-stigma, among youth workers and those in the mental health field. The project, which seeks to integrate innovative therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MBAT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), also involves the development of an AI application to offer real-time support for those battling self-stigma.

The meeting brought together youth workers from Poland, Spain, Turkey, and Curaçao. It was a remarkable opportunity to explore, learn, and share experiences in a highly collaborative environment. Throughout the mobility, participants were able to engage deeply with the project's goals while immersing themselves in the cultural and historical richness of Ohrid, strengthening the project's international network and its shared mission of mental health advocacy.

Objectives of the Event:

- Raising Awareness of Self-Stigma:** To educate and empower youth workers about the nature of self-stigma, its harmful effects on individuals, and strategies for addressing it.
 - Promoting Mental Health Support:** To explore and demonstrate the use of innovative methods like MBAT and ACT as effective tools for managing and overcoming mental health challenges.
 - Fostering Collaboration and Exchange:** To build stronger international ties among organizations, ensuring that participants leave with practical knowledge and new connections.
 - Developing Practical Tools:** To introduce and provide hands-on experience with the development of an AI application designed to offer real-time support for individuals affected by self-stigma.
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Key Activities and Achievements:

1. Opening and Icebreaking Activities:

The event began with a series of fun and creative icebreaking activities aimed at connecting participants from diverse backgrounds. These activities were designed to foster a sense of camaraderie and team spirit, helping participants feel at ease and ready for the collaborative work ahead. The energy and enthusiasm were palpable from the start, setting a positive tone for the event.

2. Presentations by Partner Organizations:

Each participating organization had the opportunity to present its mission and work, sharing inspiring stories

of how they address self-stigma and promote mental health awareness in their communities. This exchange of ideas allowed participants to gain valuable insights into each other's practices, building mutual respect and enhancing the collaborative spirit of the project.

3. Introduction to TSST: Concepts and Goals:

The Turkish team provided a comprehensive overview of the project, introducing the core concepts and objectives of TSST. This session was a crucial step in aligning everyone's understanding and expectations for the upcoming activities. It emphasized the importance of mental health, the need to challenge self-stigma, and the tools the project would use to address these issues.

4. Mindfulness-Based Dance Therapy (MBDT) Workshop:

Participants engaged in a transformative session on Mindfulness-Based Dance Therapy (MBDT), learning how movement and mindfulness can serve as powerful methods for reducing stress, improving mental well-being, and overcoming self-stigma. The session not only allowed participants to explore MBDT firsthand but also demonstrated its effectiveness as an accessible tool for youth workers to use with young people.

5. Exploration of Ohrid's Cultural and Historical Heritage:

The group embarked on a journey through the enchanting city of Ohrid, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The participants explored its ancient architecture, learned about its rich cultural and historical significance, and connected with the stories of resilience and survival embedded in the city's past. This exploration was a metaphor for the project's own mission – the ability to adapt and overcome challenges, much like the city's enduring spirit.

6. World Café Discussion on Self-Stigma:

The World Café session, led by Dr. Aleksandar Krajevski and psychologist Alberta Gulitsoska, provided an open, inclusive space for participants to discuss the topic of self-stigma among youth. This dialogue was invaluable in deepening understanding and generating concrete strategies to address the issue in different cultural contexts. The discussions not only fostered emotional insights but also resulted in tangible ideas for tackling self-stigma through community initiatives and youth programs.

7. Creative Workshop: "Body Scan and Self-Portraits for Self-Acceptance":

A highly impactful session, this workshop led by Vidanka Mojoska used art as a medium for self-reflection and healing. Participants practiced body scanning, followed by drawing self-portraits that reflected their inner emotions. This was not just an artistic exercise but a powerful tool for self-acceptance and emotional release. The act of drawing provided an opportunity to confront internal fears and doubts, offering a space for healing and self-compassion.

8. Filigree Art Workshop:

In a parallel session, Pavlina Shikaleska introduced participants to the delicate art of filigree. The workshop demonstrated the intricate process of creating silver jewelry by shaping fine threads into elegant patterns. The focus on patience, precision, and attention to detail served as a metaphor for self-acceptance: just as each element of the artwork is carefully formed into a harmonious whole, so too is the journey of self-acceptance one step at a time, built on love, patience, and creativity.

9. Spiritual Journey: Bay of Bones and St. Naum Monastery:

The group also embarked on a spiritual journey to the Bay of Bones and the serene St. Naum Monastery. In the Bay of Bones, participants reflected on the strength and resilience of ancient communities, feeling the echoes of their perseverance through history. At the monastery, the quiet waters of the Ohrid Lake and the

tranquil environment of the monastery provided a deeply spiritual experience, encouraging inner reflection and a sense of peace. The experience underscored the themes of personal strength and the importance of nurturing one's inner self.

10. Closing Reflections and Empowerment:

The closing session of the event provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences. It was clear that the mobility had not only been a platform for learning but a transformative experience for everyone involved. The discussions were filled with a sense of hope, empowerment, and a shared commitment to the project's goals. Participants left with a renewed sense of purpose, eager to continue their work and spread the message that self-stigma can be overcome through support, understanding, and the transformative power of art and mindfulness.

Results and Outcomes:

- **Enhanced Understanding of Self-Stigma:** Participants left with a stronger understanding of how self-stigma impacts individuals and communities. They were equipped with new knowledge on addressing this issue and fostering mental well-being among youth.
 - **Practical Skills:** Youth workers gained practical skills in mindfulness-based therapies, art therapy, and other innovative methods for helping those struggling with self-stigma.
 - **Strengthened International Network:** The event strengthened connections between organizations and youth workers across four countries, fostering long-term collaboration and mutual support.
 - **AI Application Development:** The project's ongoing work on developing an AI application to provide real-time support for individuals dealing with self-stigma was showcased, creating excitement and anticipation among the participants.
 - **Empowered Participants:** The event fostered a sense of empowerment, with each participant leaving with concrete ideas, new tools, and a renewed commitment to tackling self-stigma in their communities.
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Conclusion:

The preparatory meeting in Ohrid concluded as a resounding success, marking a key milestone in the *Tackling Self-Stigma Together* project. The rich blend of theoretical learning, practical workshops, cultural immersion, and personal reflection made this mobility a transformative experience for all involved. Participants not only gained valuable knowledge and skills but also formed lasting relationships that will contribute to the success of the project in the years to come.

This event was a perfect example of how creativity, mindfulness, and collaboration can unite individuals and communities in overcoming stigma and promoting mental health. The mobilization was carried out with great dedication and precision, ensuring that every aspect of the event contributed to the overall success. The energy, enthusiasm, and passion displayed by everyone involved were a testament to the shared belief that together, we can make a meaningful difference in the fight against self-stigma.