



SUMMARY REPORT

UNMASKING PAIN

INSPIRING HOPE, CREATING WELLBEING



Introduction

Unmasking Pain, funded by Arts Council England (ACE), is an innovative project exploring creative ways to depict life with persistent pain. During its two-year pilot phase (2021-23), this Fuse Award-winning initiative aimed to illuminate chronic pain through an artistic lens. The project, led by Balbir Singh Dance Company (BSDC) and various partners, conducted collaborative workshops and diverse creative activities. Participants discovered new ways to articulate and manage their pain, sparking important conversations about mental and physical health.

In its pilot phase, Unmasking Pain connected communities and transformed lives by offering alternative approaches to chronic pain, all without a medicalised perspective. The uniqueness lies in its foundation and execution within the creative arts, distinct from conventional health or care frameworks. Led by artists without a medical background, it provided a fresh and holistic outlook on pain. Participants described Unmasking Pain as an enjoyable experience, with dissolved hierarchy and human connection at its core.

Unmasking Pain is one part of BSDC's broader focus on creative health and environment in all its activities. The company aims for deep engagement at the intersection of arts and health, collaborating with various institutions and expanding its reach across different sectors. This framework aims to integrate arts into healthcare, offering innovative solutions to health challenges and promoting mentorship and education for future generations.

Aims

- Co-create new vocabularies and ways of expressing pain
- Enable pain livers to unlock their creative potential and gain a sense of autonomy over their own stories where pain is not a defining feature them
- Support in-depth research that places equal value on clinicians and lived experience contributions
- Stimulate conversations and practice to transform pain self-management long term

Who are we?

Balbir Singh Dance Company is a leading intercultural company, pushing the boundaries of traditional dance and storytelling. Founded by choreographer Balbir Singh, the ACE National Portfolio Organisation is renowned for its commitment to fostering cultural exchange and breaking down barriers, and explores the intersections of different cultures and sectors through its performances and projects.

Partners in brief

- Live Well With Pain (LWWP)
- Durham University's Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing and Pain Academy (WRIHW)
- Leeds Beckett University Centre for Pain Research
- Space2

Contributors in brief

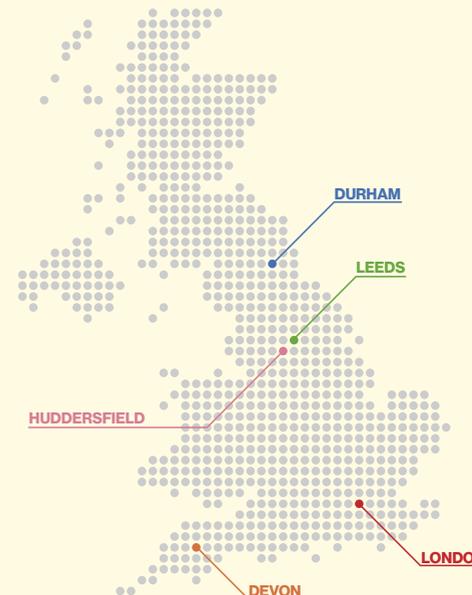
Balbir Singh, Kali Chandrasegaram, Adam Strickson, Malcolm Johnson, Villmore James, Devika Rao, Mansi Dabral, Dr Frances Cole, Prof Paul Chazot, Prof Mark Johnson, Rosie Cruickshank, Lottie Keyse, Emma Tregidden, Dawn Fuller, Louise Trewern, Chris Speyer.

Other artists and contributors included:

Anamaria Wills, Bisakha Sarker, Aniruddha Mukherjee, Bobak Champion, Elia Tomé, Ford Collier, Gareth Dakin, Jenn Wilson, Joe Harris, Jordan Mereil, Julian Germaine, Karol Wyszynski, Louise Grassby, Mark Baker, Madhura Godbole, Mussarat Rahman, Natasha Joseph, Nathan Towers-Islam, Oliver Dover, Paul Floyd Blake, Sam White, Sarah Partridge, Tim Smith.



Participants' locations



Activity Overview

Unmasking Pain delivered a range of activities co-located in the North East/Durham and Yorkshire. The sessions that were delivered changed in response to engagement and uptake of workshops. The co-production approach meant that as participants gained confidence in their own creativity, they increasingly shaped the sessions. Film-makers and photographers documented the project.

A series of creative dissemination events were launched that included exhibitions, installations, performances, presentations, podcasts and lectures. Venues included shopping centres, GP surgeries and universities. The dissemination events intended to inform pain management specialists with an ambition to bring a creative interpretation of LWWP's Ten Footsteps resources to practitioners.

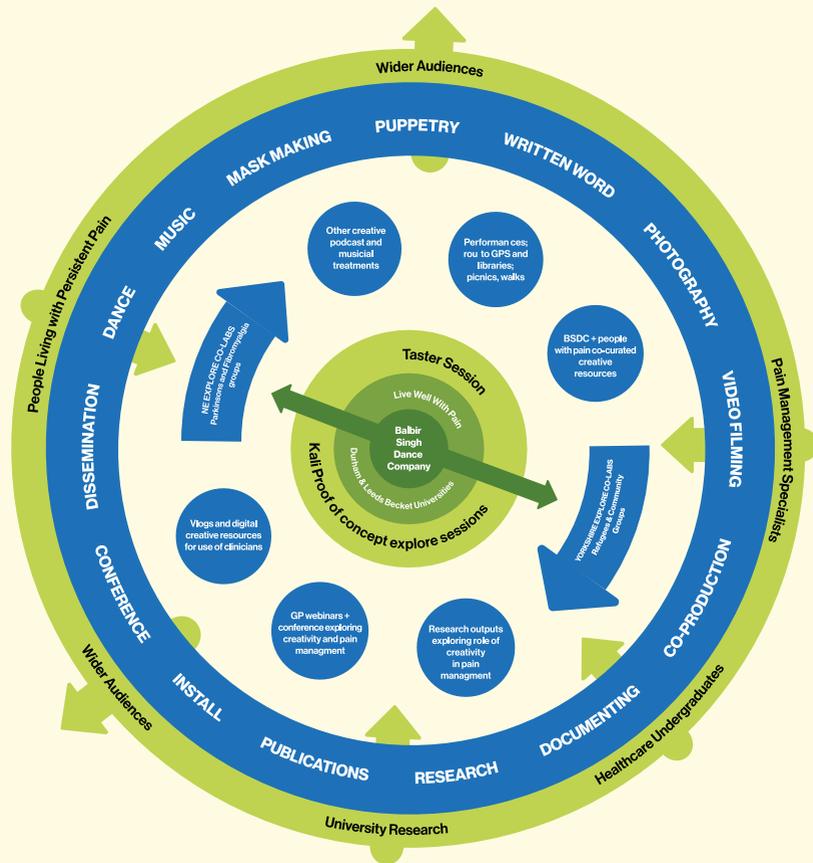


Figure 1. Summary of the Unmasking Pain Activity Diagram

Metaphors

As the project evolved, the collaboration between science and arts emphasized the use of metaphors as a central theme, enabling participants to facilitate better expression of pain experiences through creative means such as movement, colours, shapes and other art forms. Each session had a different creative focus, but linked through growing creative confidence, creativity and aesthetic awareness. These include **Clay making, Puppetry, Musical Treatments, Knots, Labyrinths, Hopscotch** and many more.



Summary and Learning

10 key outcomes were identified and evidenced:

1. Unmasking Pain encouraged participants to engage in creative activities
2. Participants felt more confident in managing pain without medication
3. Participants' perceptions of creativity underwent significant transformations
4. Reliance on pain medication decreased
5. Receptiveness to alternative creative ways to pain self-management increased
6. Participants' Confidence Scores increased
7. Participants' Pain Catastrophising Scores (PCS) decreased
8. Wellbeing index increased
9. Emotional Arousal Responses increased
10. Walking activity, general health and sleep quality increased; all physiological benefits of the programme were maintained after completion for at least 3 months



Figure 2. The shift in emotional state with Unmasking Pain



Unmasking Pain possibly gave the first real-life opportunity of exploration and observation of the impact of creative arts on individuals' self-changing experience of their pain. It enabled them to participate in a waterfall of creativity and arts in safe, supported, non-medical space to embrace their creative potential and social interconnectedness.

Its worth of beneficial health-related outcomes deserves more exploration and effort given the impact of pain in an ageing and diverse population within the UK. It could prove economically viable and valuable across such a huge population of people disconnected and in significantly poor health.

Future Development

The Unmasking Pain partnership is committed to long-term development of the project working with lived experience communities and developing conversation with the health sector to deepen research and impact on geographical area. The partnership wants to use the storytelling potential of the project to bring the message of arts and creativity as an effective treatment for self-management of pain into the mainstream. The partnership believes that it is imperative to counter the dominant narrative that exercise is the only non-clinical intervention available.



For the full report and more information,
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balbirsinghdance.co.uk

Contact: alphie.bsdc@gmail.com

Balbir Singh Dance Company is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation

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