

Cicely Ryder-Belson, Social Prescribing Coordinator, Arts 4 Dementia

CICELY RYDER-BELSON is Arts 4 Dementia's (A4D) Social Prescribing Coordinator, motivated by previous experience in projects that transform traditional gallery spaces into social and communal points of engagement. As an advocate for making art accessible for everyone, in her current role she liaises with people living with dementia, with surgeries, social prescribing link workers (SPLW) and memory services to coordinate social prescribing dance and drama programmes for people experiencing early symptoms of dementia and their companions. Her insight and experience, interacting with participants, recording and helping to analyse findings in Southwark and following up these meetings, in assistance to the director, will help inform A4D's wider social prescribing research for dissemination in 2021.

'ArtsPAL, the A4D Cultural and Creative Befriender Network.'

I'm going to introduce you to the ArtsPAL Befriender Network, I'm going to tell you why A4D has set this up, who can be a member and how you can join and access ArtsPALs.

To enable individuals to access their arts prescriptions, A4D is coordinating a network of cultural and creative befrienders. The idea being, to empower individuals from the very onset of dementia to thrive through shared creative interests. As our cultural venues open up once more, an ArtsPAL can accompany them to a weekly arts or wellbeing activity. This befriender network has been set up for mutual benefit, for ArtsPALs to enjoy creative outings together, and to help preserve resilience in the community for longer.

The ArtsPAL Befriender Network includes a range of organisations in culture, health and wellbeing who can offer volunteer befriending services to support individuals who fall between service cracks – those at the start of a life with cognitive challenges. Set up by Veronica, President of Arts 4 Dementia, in 2019, the network connects individuals with shared interests in their local area. It is designed to nurture partnerships, restore confidence, preserve identity and help individuals explore new opportunities, cultural interests, and skills together, in the community.

Who can be a member of the network? ArtPALs become creative companions for each other. Members of the network could be arts or medical students, befrienders from local charities or volunteers trained by a range of arts organisations, museum and heritage sites. They may be arts facilitators consolidating dementia awareness training, or they may be local Culture and Age-Friendly Champions.

Recommended by Dr Bogdan Chiva Giurca (founder of the National Social Prescribing Student Champion Scheme, medical and neuroscience students, interacting with A4D's participants in dance and drama programmes last year, felt that they themselves learned much that would inform their future careers. As an ArtsPAL, students can benefit from the bidirectional learning model which the National Social Prescribing Student Scheme champions, not only gaining a friend and supporting the wellbeing of others but gaining first-hand experience of the benefits of social prescribing, and the capabilities and creativity of people with cognitive challenges.

Members of the network would need to have a DBS check and have had early-stage dementia awareness training or can upskill their knowledge by attending Arts 4 Dementia training. Individuals can refer to the network before a formal diagnosis, when they are looking to stay engaged in weekly arts to preserve brain health, or after a formal diagnosis, when they are in the early, often isolating, stages, looking to access weekly creative stimulation to override symptoms.

Since the network's launch in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has hugely affected communities, isolating individuals from the social connections and activities that previously supported them. The value of participating in arts activities in the community feels more pertinent than ever, particularly for those living alone.

Link workers can refer to the ArtsPAL Befriender Network, to connect to a volunteer who can help bridge the gap when individuals start to attend physical activities once more, and for those still wanting to connect to creativity online, ArtsPALs can detail if they are able to provide digital support.

Over the pandemic we have also seen how communities have come together. An army of volunteers stepped forward in a time of need, many of them for the first time. Social prescribing, now, becoming mainstream practice, embraces a holistic model which prioritises the values and interests of an individual, and it needs no convincing of the efficacy of artistic stimulation in preserving health and wellbeing.

There is a renewed momentum behind community and connection, to continue to break down barriers, and to connect people to creativity when they need it most. ArtPALs can enable the feeling of a shared experience and curiosity, which so often only the arts can provoke. Whether it is walking round the gallery with a friend, the freedom of moving in a dance class, or singing in a chorus with others. If you offer cultural and creative befriending and wish your organisation to be listed in the ArtsPAL network, you can register by visiting our website.

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