CREATION GUIDE

STEP BY STEP INTO COMICS CREATION

BREAKING TABOOS about MENTAL HEALTH

Co-funded by the European Union

INTRODUCTION

The Breaking Taboos about Mental Health project was set up to break down negative thinking about mental health and change harmful stereotypes about people affected by mental disorders. As part of the project, partners from five organisations in France, Belgium, Lithuania, Slovenia and Poland worked on a variety of resources useful for achieving the vabove-mentioned goals.

This **guide is part of the Creation kit**, which also includes **infographics** to support the implementation of paper based and digital workshops. The following chapters of the guide provide guidance for preparing and conducting workshops on creating comics as an engaging form of storytelling that breaks down stereotypes about mental health. The guide provides practical tips for different target groups:

* for youth, at school and youth centres
* for adults, to become facilitators
* for people with learning difficulties

Our project focuses on inclusion, which is echoed on our workshops that work on destigmatising prejudices about people with mental health disorders. Besides that, we want workshop participants to experience the pleasure and usefulness of working in a group, sharing experiences and gaining new skills. We emphasise that workshops should also be also be playful while delivering a message. To this end, we suggest that they use the form of a comic book, which offers the opportunity to combine narrative parts, dialogue and images. Such visualisation promotes better learning and remembering of important content. Moreover, we are convinced that it will reach both, adolescents and adults.

Since our target groups for the workshops are both young people and adults we have to keep in mind the different emphasis and approach.

Indeed, the adults, in this context, the educators, will be working with young people to create taboo-breaking comics about mental health. On the contrary for young people we focus more on creative-artistic-educational activities. For adults, we prepare workshops that should also include more theoretical principles of creating a workshop/activity/meeting with young people and guiding them in the production of comics.

We expect and believe that our proposal will be warmly and positively received by the workshop participants, and we look forward to constructive feedback that will allow us and others to improve any work on dispelling myths about mental health.

GENERAL PEDAGOGICAL OBJECTIVES

DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES THROUGH INTERACTIVE COMICS

The workshop on creating interactive comics with young people aims to use this unique art form as a powerful medium for discussing and challenging stereotypes related to mental health. By allowing participants to use provided graphics or draw their comics, the workshop fosters a dynamic environment where creativity and critical thinking can flourish. Comics, with their ability to tell complex stories through visuals and narratives, serve as an effective tool to engage young minds in conversations about mental health and the myths that often surround it. This chapter explores the pedagogical objectives of the workshop, highlighting the skills and insights participants gain through this creative process.

ANALYSING STEREOTYPES

One of the key objectives of the workshop is to develop participants' ability to identify and critique stereotypes present in various media forms. By understanding how mental health is often portrayed, participants can learn to discern bias and challenge misconceptions.

Tips for Facilitators:

* Encourage participants to share examples of stereotypes they have encountered in media and discuss the impact of these portrayals.
* Guide discussions on how to identify underlying messages in media and explore alternative narratives that challenge stereotypes.

PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING

The workshop seeks to encourage participants to question and deconstruct stereotypes, fostering a critical engagement with media. By doing so, they become more aware of the narratives they consume and create, promoting a deeper understanding of mental health.

Tips for Facilitators:

* Encourage participants to create comics that offer alternative perspectives to common stereotypes, emphasising the diversity of mental health experiences
* Facilitate debates or discussions that challenge conventional thinking, promoting open-mindedness and exploration of different viewpoints.

ENCOURAGING OPEN DIALOGUE

Creating a safe space for participants to share personal experiences and perspectives is crucial for building empathy and understanding. The workshop aims to facilitate open and honest discussions about mental health, breaking down barriers and fostering connection.

Tips for Facilitators:
*Use icebreakers and team-building activities to create a comfortable and trusting environment for sharing.
*Lead by example by sharing your own stories or experiences, demonstrating vulnerability and openness.

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Another objective is to cultivate empathy by exploring different mental health experiences and viewpoints. By creating characters and stories that reflect diverse experiences, participants can better understand the challenges faced by others.

Tips for Facilitators:
*Encourage participants to research and include characters with diverse backgrounds and experiences, emphasising the importance of authentic representation.
*Facilitate activities where participants can share their stories and listen to others, fostering a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

PROMOTING ADVOCACY

A vital objective of the workshop is to empower young participants to become advocates for mental health awareness. By creating comics that address and challenge societal norms and stereotypes, participants can use their voices to promote change.

Tips for Facilitators:
*Encourage participants to think about the messages they want to convey through their comics and how these can influence others.
* Provide opportunities for participants to showcase their work to a wider audience, emphasising the impact their voices can have on social change.

COLLABORATION, LEADERSHIP, AND DIVERSE TEAM ROLES

Developing leadership skills through effective teamwork and understanding the importance of diverse roles within a team are core objectives of the workshop. By collaborating, participants gain insights into the significance of collective effort and the impact of diverse perspectives in reaching common goals.

Tips for Facilitators:

*Assign group projects that promote collaboration, encouraging participants to assume leadership roles while working cohesively as a team.

*Showcase successful examples of collaboration, and emphasise how diverse skills and viewpoints contribute to achieving shared objectives.

ENCOURAGING PERSONAL EXPRESSION

One of the primary objectives of the workshop is to enable participants to express their thoughts and emotions through art. By engaging in comic creation, young people can explore their personal experiences and convey them visually, which can be particularly powerful when addressing sensitive topics like mental health.

Tips for Facilitators:

*Encourage participants to explore a wide range of emotions and themes in their comics by sharing examples of diverse storytelling.

*Provide a judgment-free space where all creative expressions are valued and respected, allowing participants to freely express themselves.

USE SCENARIOS

COMIC WORKSHOP FOR FACILTATORS

This comic workshop equips educators with creative tools to foster open discussions on mental health, helping students process emotions and reduce stigma. Comics offer a unique way to address sensitive topics by combining visual storytelling with relatable narratives, making it easier for students to engage with complex issues and gain understanding.

FOR WHOM?

This workshop is designed for educators, school counsellors, and support staff who wish to address mental health topics in a creative, inclusive, and stigma-free manner. It's especially valuable for teachers, youth workers, working with young people facing mental health challenges or those looking to create a supportive environment for open discussions.

USING COMICS TO BREAK STIGMA

Through mental health storytelling, educators help students confront and question stereotypes, fostering a culture of empathy and understanding. This approach provides a safe, accessible way to address difficult emotions and helps reduce the stigma surrounding mental health.

WHY HOLD COMIC CREATION WORKSHOPS?

This workshop gives educators skills to use comics as a creative way to encourage self-expression and empathy in students. Comics make it easier for students to share their feelings, recognise others' challenges, and understand mental health's importance. By encouraging diverse perspectives, comics break down stereotypes and help convey complex challenges in a way that feels accessible.

HOW TO PROCEED?

Identify Core Themes: select age-appropriate themes on mental health topics that align with the needs of your target group.

PREPARATION TIPS:

* **Gather Materials in Advance:** have supplies like drawing paper, markers, templates, and sample comics ready for inspiration.
* **Create a Safe Space:** remind educators of the importance of a supportive environment where students feel safe sharing and expressing themselves.
* **Encourage Inclusivity:** promote comics as a tool for diverse voices, helping students from all backgrounds feel seen and heard.

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

Start by **introducing the basics of comic** storytelling, including creating characters, organising panels, and writing dialogue.
Here are some concrete examples for introducing the basics of comic storytelling in a workshop:

Creating Characters: have participants think of characters representing a feeling or personality trait to better showcase the mental health stereotypes. Discuss how small details, like expressions or clothing, can convey personality and mood.

Organising Panels: present examples of various panel layouts, such as phone conversations or dialogues between characters. This helps participants more easily select a format and understand how layout choices influence storytelling.

Writing Dialogue: introduce word and thought bubbles, explaining their role in conveying dialogue and internal thoughts. Ask participants to create a brief dialogue between two characters, focusing on word choice and bubble placement to enhance the scene.

Group Brainstorming: allow educators to brainstorm storylines that resonate with students, focusing on empathy, understanding, and breaking down stereotypes.

Script and Sketching: guide educators through simple scriptwriting and sketching exercises.

CONCRETE EXAMPLES:

Example 1: ask participants to write a short script for a character dealing with a challenge, like managing stress. The script could include:

A brief scene description: "A student sits at a cluttered desk, overwhelmed by schoolwork."

Dialogue: "I don't know how I'll finish this on time!"
Thought bubbles to show inner thoughts or feelings: "Everyone else seems to have it all figured out."

Example 2: Have participants create a two-line exchange between two characters:

Character A: "I'm really struggling with all this pressure."
Character B: "You're not alone – we all feel like that sometimes."

TIPS FOR WORKSHOP REFLECTION:

Encourage Personal Insights: ask students what emotions or ideas they found easiest or hardest to express through their comic, revealing comfort levels and any underlying feelings about the topic.
Discuss the Creative Process: invite students to reflect on their choices of characters, settings, or themes. Questions like "Why did you choose this storyline?" or "What message were you hoping to convey?" can deepen their storytelling understanding.
I**dentify Connections:** Encourage students to share personal connections to their comic's theme by asking, "Did this story remind you of any real experiences or feelings?"
Explore Peer Perspectives: invite students to discuss how their classmates approached similar themes differently, helping them appreciate diverse viewpoints and storytelling styles.
Celebrate Growth: ask students to reflect on any new skills or insights they gained from creating their comic. This could be a technical skill, like drawing, or a personal takeaway, like the value of sharing their feelings.
Set Future Goals: encourage students to consider how they might use comics or creative expression in the future to explore other topics or emotions.

COMIC WORKSHOP ON MENTAL HEALTH FOR TEENAGERS

This part is designed to help educators successfully conduct a comic creation workshop focused on mental health for young people. It emphasises methods for facilitating meaningful discussions, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment, and guiding young people through the creative process. The guide provides insights on how educators can support and engage teenagers in exploring mental health topics through storytelling.

WORKSHOP PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The goal of this workshop is to provide teenagers with a creative platform to express their thoughts and emotions regarding mental health. Comics offer a **gentle, relatable way** for young people to **explore complex emotions and challenge stereotypes**. As an educator, your role is to **guide and motivate participants**, creating a space built on openness and trust.

KEY POINTS FOR EDUCATORS

CREATING A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACE

Establish Ground Rules: begin the workshop by setting clear guidelines for respectful communication and confidentiality. Encourage participants to respect each other's stories and experiences.

Encourage Openness: let teens know they can share as much or as little as they feel comfortable. Reassure them that they won't be judged and that this is a space for personal expression.

Be Patient and Empathetic: understand that discussing mental health may be sensitive for some participants. Be ready to listen and offer support, showing empathy towards the feelings they express through their comics.

INTRODUCING MENTAL HEALTH THEMES

Mental health topics can be introduced within the activity framework.

AN ACTIVITY EXAMPLE TO INTRODUCE THE TOPICS

Setting Up with Sticky Notes: each participant is given a sticky note with a mental health condition written on it (e.g., depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, eating disorder). The sticky note is placed on their forehead so they can't see what's written, but others can.

Moving Around and Asking Questions: participants mingle, asking each other questions to help identify the mental health condition they "carry." Questions might focus on symptoms and behaviours (e.g., "Would I often feel very low for long periods?" "Do I have trouble focusing or staying organised?"). This allows them to explore common signs and feelings associated with different conditions.

Reflecting on Stereotypes and Symptoms: once they identify the condition, each participant is encouraged to think about and write down any stereotypes or myths they've heard about that condition.

DEBRIEF

Avoiding Stereotypes: as a group, discuss how certain language and stereotypes can stigmatise people with mental health conditions. Encourage participants to think about how they could depict these themes more accurately and with empathy in their stories, breaking down stigmas.

Using Real-World Examples: if they feel comfortable enough, ask participants to share any personal experiences or real-life examples they know of that challenge the stereotypes around these conditions. Discuss scenarios like dealing with stress, handling peer pressure, or managing fluctuating moods, and encourage teens to think about how mental health is relevant in everyday life.

Normalising Conversations: conclude by framing mental health as an important part of well-being, just like physical health. Emphasise that it's healthy to talk openly about these experiences and that seeking support is a positive and normal choice.

FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS ON PERSONAL THEMES

Open-Ended Questions: use open-ended questions to spark reflection, such as "What does resilience mean to you?" or "How do you think others feel when facing a similar situation?" These prompts allow teens to think deeply without feeling pressured to share personal experiences unless they choose to.

Vigilance on Emotional Triggers: be aware of potential emotional triggers and be prepared to handle them sensitively. If a participant becomes upset or withdrawn, check in with them privately, and offer resources if necessary.

Encourage Empathy and Perspective-Taking: guide teens to create characters or situations that reflect empathy, helping them explore perspectives other than their own. This can broaden their understanding and create more inclusive stories.

SUPPORTING CREATIVITY AND STORYTELLING

Guide, Don't Direct: while it's essential to provide examples and general guidance, allow teens to develop their story ideas independently. Offer support by helping them structure their thoughts or clarify their messages without imposing ideas.

Focus on Expression Over Perfection: emphasise that the goal of this workshop is self-expression, not artistic skill. Encourage participants to focus on communicating their ideas rather than achieving a polished look.

Celebrate Diversity in Storytelling: acknowledge and appreciate the variety of stories and styles. Remind participants that everyone has a unique way of seeing and expressing the world, which adds richness to their work.

GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Focus on Positives: highlight what each participant has done well, emphasising the strengths in their story, character development, or creativity.

Encourage Personal Reflection: rather than critiquing the content, ask reflective questions like "What inspired your story?" or "What message are you hoping others take from your comic?"

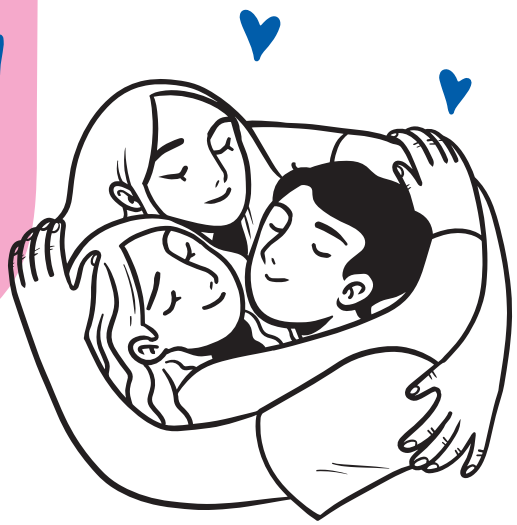
Provide Encouragement for Growth: suggest gentle ways they could expand their ideas or add depth without undermining their confidence.

THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE IN EMPOWERING YOUTH

As a facilitator, your support can empower young people to express themselves authentically and confidently. Through this workshop, educators play a crucial role in normalising mental health discussions, breaking down stereotypes, and fostering empathy. Remember, your guidance helps teens not only tell stories but also build emotional awareness and resilience, equipping them with lifelong skills in self-expression and understanding.

INTERACTIVE COMIC WORKSHOP FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

This interactive workshop is designed to be accessible and engaging for individuals with special needs. Adaptations are made to ensure that participants can express themselves creatively in ways that best suit their abilities, using materials and tools tailored to their unique strengths. Our aim is to foster an inclusive space where everyone can participate equally, develop new skills, and enjoy the experience of creating comics together.



PREPARATION

Theme: Simple, relatable themes such as daily routines, emotions, or friendship to make it easier for participants to connect and express their ideas.

Materials: Provide a variety of drawing materials (pencils, markers, crayons), pre-drawn comic strip templates, speech bubbles, scissors, glue, and coloured paper. If available, include digital tools like tablets with basic comic-making apps.

Space: Spacious area with tables and chairs to allow comfortable brainstorming, sketching, and sharing.

WORKSHOP

INTRODUCTION

Start by presenting comics as a creative way to share stories using both images and text. Display a few basic comic samples with different approaches to inspire participants. Encourage everyone to start thinking about the main idea for their comic, offering helpful suggestions like **“What brings you joy?”** or **“Describe a memorable day spent with friends.”** This opening is designed to make the workshop inclusive and engaging for all.

* Introduce comics as a playful way to tell stories through pictures and words.
* Show simple examples of comics with different styles to inspire participants.
* Encourage participants to brainstorm their comic theme. Use prompts if needed, such as **“How do you feel today?”** or **“Is t okay to feel sad?”**

STORY BRAINSTORMING

To help participants with special needs develop a simple story, start with open-ended questions like, **“What makes you smile?”** or **“Can you share a fun memory?”** Encourage sharing through conversation and offer visual prompts to spark ideas. Support them in breaking down their story into a beginning, middle, and end, adapting the approach to suit everyone’s comfort and needs.

* Help participants think of a simple story or moment they want to illustrate.
* Offer assistance in breaking down the story into a few steps or actions. Keep it simple and visual.

SCRIPTWRITING

Guide them in translating their ideas into a basic script. Identify the characters, key actions, and simple dialogues or thoughts for each panel.
Use templates to make it easier for participants to visualise their story.

SKETCHING THE COMIC

Provide participants with comic strip templates.
Encourage them to lightly sketch the main elements in each panel using simple shapes and symbols.
If using digital tools, guide them through basic functions in the comic-making app, such as selecting backgrounds, characters, and adding speech bubbles.

* Allow participants to colour their comics and add details using crayons, markers, or digital tools.
* Assist them in filling speech bubbles or writing short dialogues. Offer support for those who need help with writing or expressing their ideas.

SHARING AND REFLECTION

Encourage participants to share their finished comics with the group.
Ask them to explain their story and what they enjoyed during the creation process.
Facilitate a positive feedback session where everyone appreciates each other's work.
Provide support – be prepared to assist participants at every stage, addressing their individual needs.

BRINGING YOUR COMIC TO LIFE

PAPER AND DIGITAL FORMATS

Choosing between digital and paper formats affects how you organise your workshop but does not change the creation of the scenario and storyboard. In both formats, you'll need to balance text and visuals.

UNDERSTANDING THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Digital Format: Offers accessibility options like resizing text, adding audio, and highlighting elements. It increases engagement with interactivity and multimedia.

Paper Format: Easier to set up as it requires no internet or devices, it removes tech barriers and allows flexible creative expression.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A FORMAT:

Audience Needs: Assess digital skills and accessibility needs. Consider whether the workshop can be an opportunity to improve digital competences.

Resources and Setting: Check access to devices, internet, and printing resources.

Learning Objectives: Match the format to your educational goals, whether they are digital skills, creativity, or traditional art.

Technical Requirements:

Ensure access to devices (tablets, computers), internet, and a software tool (like BookCreator & Genially for comics or Canva for posters). Prepare accounts and permissions beforehand to allow easy access for participants.

IMPLEMENTING THE PAPER FORMAT WORKSHOP

Materials Needed: Large A3 paper, pens, markers, coloured pencils, glue, and printed sets of BTMH characters, backgrounds, and speech bubbles.

Paper workshops are cost-effective and straightforward. After creating storyboards, participants use the BTMH printed materials to design their comics on A3 sheets, which can be set up as posters. They can personalise characters, add backgrounds, and fully express their creativity.

Afterwards, educators can scan or photograph the comics to share online or compile them into a book. Display the finished comics on a wall, and let each group present their work to the others.

Both hands-on approaches encourage creativity and discussion, supporting the workshop's goal of breaking mental health taboos among teenagers.

IMPLEMENTING THE DIGITAL FORMAT WORKSHOP

Canva: Offers templates similar to paper posters, with the added benefit of a media library and interactive features. You can upload the BTMH illustrations and export the final comic as a PDF or JPEG.

BookCreator: Designed specifically for digital comics, it provides ready-to-use frames and lets you integrate BTMH illustrations. This tool allows for digital display, online publishing, and exporting as a PDF.

Genially: Well-known amongst the teacher's community, it provides intuitive design to create digital comics using BTMH illustrations.

Feel free to use other tools that suit your audience's needs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise that we see **great potential in using the form of comics** to debate and teach about the harmfulness of stereotypes. The comic strip, through its **accessible format** combining word and image, fits well with the needs of today's youth. The clear use of text, focused mainly on short and dynamic dialogues enriched with schematic images, has a good chance of reaching young audiences and conveying important messages. And this content, in line with the aims of our project, is about showing what mental health really is, without stigmatisation, unnecessary myths and misconceptions. Learning that combines educational values, fun, interaction, creativity, group work, storytelling and sharing reflections is for the 21st century. And this is exactly the method we propose through the creation of comics.

We wish all future users of our guide, whether young people, youth workers, teachers or other professionals, a wise and effective journey through Breaking Taboos about Mental Health.

Testimony

"Everyone has a problem every problem is important and it is not worth downplaying them."

Teenager, 15 yo

Testimony

"People are increasingly aware of their emotions, health and psyche, but still not enough. Young people should be made even more aware in this direction. This is why we need such projects."

Teenager, 16 yo

Testimony

"Mental health problems are not seen at first glance. Mental problems "have no age"."

Teenager, 17 yo

Testimony

"I have a dyscalculia, but that doesn't make me stupid. Maybe I'm bad at math, but I'm good at a lot of things, like art. Everyone has their own strengths."

Young people aged, 15 yo

Testimony

"Mental health education is needed."

Teenager, 14 yo

Testimony

"I have never thought that other people might act strangely because of their disorder or mental health issues, simply thought they are weirdos or crazy."

Teenage boy, 16 yo

Testimony

"I used to think that someone's bad mood was just an excuse or laziness, but now I understand how deeply it can affect their mental health."

Teenage girl, 15 yo

Testimony

"Just because you're young doesn't necessarily mean you won't have problems."

Young people, 20 yo

Testimony

"Just because someone is smiling doesn't mean they're not struggling. We need to check in with each other."

Teenager, 16 yo

Testimony

"It's okay to cry, no matter if you're a boy or a girl. Everyone has feelings, and it is normal to express them."

Young people, 15 yo

Testimony

"I noticed that during the activity, some people used weaker classmates to make fun of them in the comic, and even added their own alter personality into the story."

Teenage girl, 16 yo

Testimony

"I learned that we cannot call sadness depression as other people are really struggling with it."

Teenage girl, 15 yo

This creation guide is part of the European project BREAKING TABOOS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, co-funded by the programme Erasmus+ Youth&Sport.

This project aims to raise awareness on mental health amongst teenagers through a series of workshop on interactive comic creation. Some guides, some practical sheets, and other pedagogical resources are available online.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ON THE TOPIC OF MENTAL HEALTH AND THE DIFFERENT DISORDERS, YOU CAN CHECK OUR INTERACTIVE COMICS ON OUR WEBSITE:

BREAKING-TABOOS.EU

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