

# Unmasking Pain



## PARTNERS

Dr Paul Chazot (Durham University) project research  
Balbir Singh (Balbir Singh Dance Company) artistic lead  
Dawn Fuller (Space 2) producer / project management  
Emma Tregidden (Space 2) producer / project management  
Dr Frances Cole (Live Well with Pain), pain rehabilitation specialist (retired)  
Diarmuid Denny (UCL Hospitals NHS Trust) pain physiotherapist

Professor Mark Johnson (Leeds Beckett University) project research  
Rosie Cruickshank (St Thomas and Guys Input PMP programmes), pain management physiotherapist  
Dr Ghazala Tabasam (Leeds Beckett University) pain research team  
Isobel Jacob (Leeds Beckett University), senior lecturer in the school of health  
Jon Woolmore (Sessay Consulting) project evaluation  
David Andrassy (Andrassy Media) project concept / graphic design

Unmasking Pain is a creative collaboration between artists, people living with ongoing pain and pain management specialists to explore the shared challenges of living with pain. It seeks to find a voice for those living with pain through artistic collaboration, the art form and trials of different creative approaches to support those living with pain to gain a sense of identity beyond their all-encompassing pain. Long-term pain, for whatever reason, affects 14 million people throughout the UK. However, reliance on medication, including opioids, is the mainstay of management and is proving harmful to health for many.



## GOALS

Unmasking Pain is supporting the arts and health sectors to take a shared approach to explore the relationship between participating in the creative process and living well. Clinicians will better understand their lived experience to inform more holistic approaches to care. The goal is to be able to understand, process, articulate, and reveal the story and have it listened to and understood to enhance living well with pain; have a healthier relationship with pain; others appreciate and understand better (friends, GPs, carers, employers); reduce reliance on pain medications.

## BACKGROUND

Persistent pain is a huge worldwide health challenge. It is the primary reason people in the UK see their GP. The WHO recognised it as a priority disease in 2019. The Unmasking Pain programme has unfolded through a series of 'co-labs' - creative and critical spaces where artists, people living with pain and pain management specialists come together with artistic director Balbir Singh. Working with arts practitioners offers creative and innovative ways to explore life and live well despite their pain.

## DATA/METHODOLOGY

This project has been evaluated using mixed methods, involving subjective qualitative questionnaires, a range of objective quantitative methods, including activity, sleep and physiological measures, as well as novel AI machine-learned morphological and thermal imaging techniques (see figure), as indicators of physical and mental health, respectively; co-production of scientists, artists and expert pain lives, all simultaneously sharing and learning from the experience, with a range of cultural ethnicity, backgrounds, gender and ages from County Durham and Yorkshire.

## RESULTS AND IMPACTS

Now we are at the end of the series of co-labs, the multi-disciplinary artworks created are being curated to form an UNMASKING PAIN exhibition currently being rolled out in innovative settings in the North of England, including shop windows, GP services, parks, Community centres., as well as through digital and online presence.

- Outcomes for the Unmasking Pain Programme participants (n=12 pain lives)
- 100% of the participants' need for pain medication has either decreased or stayed the same during the project
- 100% of the participants' receptiveness to alternative pain management has increased or stayed the same during the project
- 100% of the participants' pain catastrophising scores have decreased during the project
- 100% of the participants' confidence scores have increased during the project

### Some quotes:

"It has changed my entire perspective on creativity"

"I have found the creativity of making flower arrangements more important than taking painkillers"

"I realise I do not need to rely on pain medication now, I can use other methods to take my mind off the pain"

"The pain is always there, but I feel more confident about carrying on without meds"

## UNMASKING PAIN CONCLUSIONS

**Chronic pain** - what can be changed? Lifestyle, perspective/frame of mind, coping mechanisms through the arts and developing a creative approach to living well with pain, relationship with self, art, environment, sense of ownership of the body, emotions, creative mindset.

### What happens when the story has been told?

- Has it been listened to effectively / how to listen to the story
- Process of finding the language (the ongoing journey of self-discovery and challenge)
- What is the new story to be told?

## WHAT IAA SUPPORT DID

Unmasking Pain - 'Taking your shoes for a walk' provided a mechanism to explain and add to the Unmasking pain programme concept. The walk took attendees through the beautiful landscape of the Durham Botanic garden, animated with surprising moments along the way, from sculptures and storytelling to pop-up performances. Dancers, versed in the traditional Indian style of Kathak, using intricate hand gestures, will depict elements of nature like flowers, water, rain, sky, and bees, inspiring a deeper connection with nature. Music and rhythm drifted through the scenery from musicians playing, responding to the natural movement of the trees and inspired by their surroundings. It was an opportunity for everyone to reconnect with the natural world, see the wood and the trees, appreciate nature's aesthetics and tune in to their senses to find sweet spots of sight, touch, taste, sound and smell. Overall, supporting walkers to better understand how being at one with nature can bring joy and support improved health and wellbeing.

