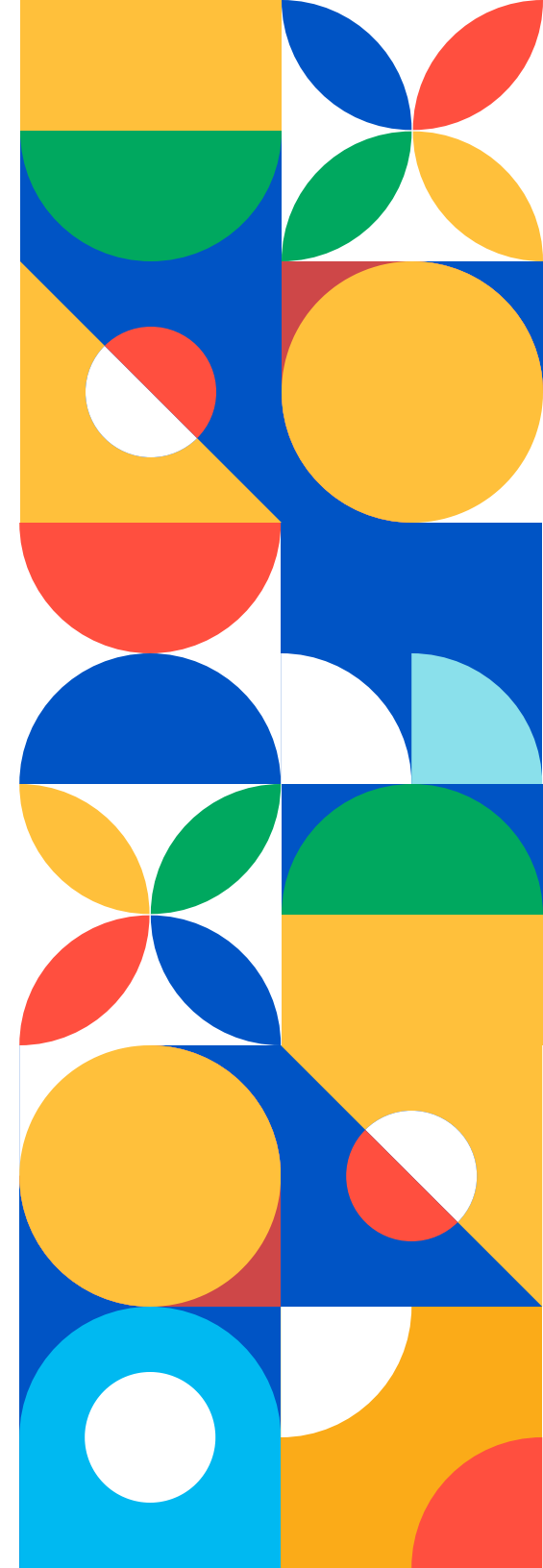


Social prescribing arts & culture: A toolkit for service providers

Supporting newcomer well-being through creative connections





Social prescribing arts & culture

Dear service provider,

Looking for ways to connect your clients with arts and culture opportunities through social prescribing? You're in the right place. This toolkit is designed as a guide for service providers: including social service workers, healthcare practitioners, settlement workers, health coaches, and anyone supporting newcomer populations across the GTA.

It offers practical, easy-to-use guidance on how to link newcomers to creative and cultural activities that promote mental wellness, build social connections, and foster a strong sense of belonging. Whether you're just getting started or looking to expand existing supports, this resource will help you use arts and culture as meaningful tools for care and connection. This toolkit is designed to:

- Understand what social prescribing is and how it works
- Explore the unique value of arts and culture for newcomer wellness
- Learn how to initiate meaningful, client-centered conversations
- Make thoughtful and accessible referrals to community arts opportunities
- Reduce barriers and build connections that support long-term well-being

We also invite you to explore the city creatively and discover the many arts and culture experiences it has to offer.

With care, Access Alliance arts for family health team

Photo: Access Alliance participants engaging in City of Toronto's art festival at city hall, 2025.

Acknowledgements

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For more information, contact: arts@accessalliance.ca

Photo: Access Alliance participants engaging in natural pigment dyeing at AccessPoint on Jane, 2025.





Here's what this toolkit offers

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Photo: Access Alliance participants engaging in City of Toronto's art festival at city hall, 2025.

What is social prescribing?

Social prescribing is about looking beyond clinical care and connecting clients with community-based services and activities that support their overall health and well-being.

It recognizes that health is shaped not only by medical needs, but also by everyday factors such as where people live, work, learn, and build relationships. Using a social prescribing approach, service providers can “prescribe” or refer clients to non-clinical supports that help address these social factors and improve quality of life. Using this approach, some of the most common challenges being addressed include:

- Inadequate social supports
- Social isolation
- Food insecurity
- Advice on community resources
- Poverty impacts
- Mental health and well-being

Social prescribing connects medical care with everyday life, improving health outcomes by nurturing what matters: connection, purpose, and community.

- **Holistic care:** Supports the individual’s full range of needs, including physical, emotional, and social
- **Strengthens social connections:** Reduces loneliness by engaging people with their communities
- **Empowerment:** Encourages active participation in one’s own health journey
- **Cost-effective:** Addresses root causes of health issues, reducing emergency service use and overall healthcare costs
- **Health equity:** Helps reduce gaps in access to care and community supports, particularly for individuals facing social, structural, and systemic barriers

Photo: Participants observing collective paintings at the “Healing arts for newcomer wellness” event, 2025.



Why prescribe arts & culture?

Arts and culture programs are a great way for newcomers to get involved in their community. They're easy to access, don't require fluent English, and provide welcoming spaces where people can connect with others. Beyond simply being enjoyable, these programs support personal well-being and help newcomers feel a sense of belonging, making them a powerful tool for social prescribing.

Enhances mental & emotional well-being by encouraging creative expression, building emotional resilience, and promoting cognitive engagement.

Fosters social connection & inclusion by creating opportunities for engagement and shared experience, encouraging social interaction and community cohesion, and building confidence and belonging.

Supports physical health & healthy habits by encouraging movement and physical activity through dance, drama, and other activities, and promoting routine and structure.

Accessible and community driven as libraries, museums, and community centres offer free or low-cost access to workshops, events, and cultural activities, and online classes provide options for those with mobility or transportation barriers.



Photo: Access Alliance participants engaging in City of Toronto's art festival at city hall, 2025.

Why arts and culture matter for newcomer health?

Social prescribing arts and culture are unique and effective for newcomers (e.g. immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and non-status individuals). In Canada, health inequities are rooted in social, political, and economic disadvantages. These disparities disproportionately affect newcomers, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with lower socioeconomic status. Integration in a new country often involves significant challenges, including language barriers, social isolation, cultural displacement, grief, trauma, and anxiety, all of which can negatively impact health.

Arts and culture referrals are particularly effective because they help individuals reconnect with their identities, home, language, and cultural heritage. Cultural expression through music, food, storytelling, or visual art can serve as a bridge between past and present, helping newcomers maintain a sense of continuity while adapting to a new environment.

Photo: Participants engage in outdoor drumming part of Shadowland park workshop, 2025.



Recent and long-term immigrants report higher rates of loneliness than the Canadian-born population. Loneliness increases with age, low household income, and higher levels of education.

Stick et al. (2022)

Taking part in arts, heritage and culture activities through social prescribing can be beneficial for physical and psychological health.

Mughal et al. (2022)

For every dollar invested into social prescribing programs may return \$4.43 to society through improved well-being and reduced costs incurred on the health system and government.

Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing (2024)

Arts and culture opportunities...

Don't know where to begin seeking the arts? Social prescribing is a person-centered approach, so it will look different for everyone. Arts and culture opportunities can take many forms. Here are some examples, though the possibilities go far beyond this list:

Creative arts activities

- Community art workshops (painting, drawing, printmaking) to support self-expression and reduce stress.
- Craft circles such as knitting, sewing, pottery, or beadwork that encourage social connection and fine-motor engagement.
- Photography walks that combine creativity with gentle physical activity.

Literary and language-based activities

- Creative writing or poetry groups where participants can explore personal stories safely.
- Book clubs—including multilingual or newcomer-friendly groups—to build community and reduce isolation.
- Story-sharing circles integrating oral histories or cultural traditions.

Cultural experiences

- Museum or gallery visits with guided tours that encourage reflection and cultural learning.
- Visits to heritage sites that connect people to local history.
- Cultural festivals or community celebrations that help newcomers feel included and connected.
- Art in the park sessions where participants sketch, paint, or photograph nature.

Sound-based & movement activities

- Community drumming or rhythm sessions, accessible without musical experience.
- Instrumental workshops (e.g., ukulele groups, keyboard basics) that support cognitive wellbeing.
- Dance or movement classes tailored for different ages or abilities, including culturally specific dance traditions.

Visit the [Access Alliance Arts and Culture Map of the GTA](#) for social prescribing opportunities! Reach out to arts@accessalliance.ca to contribute your ideas and resources to the map.



Photo: Shadowland equinox parade, Anne Barber holding a flag of love, 2024.



Supporting as a service provider

Link Workers, often called Connectors, are trusted professionals who provide non-clinical, person-centred support by helping people connect with social and community-based resources that improve health and well-being. Their role goes beyond traditional care by focusing on the whole person and what matters most in their daily life.

Connectors work hand in hand with healthcare teams, social workers, and community partners to address challenges that medicine alone cannot solve such as loneliness, stress, financial strain, or housing insecurity. By building strong relationships and understanding each individual's unique situation, they help people feel supported, heard, and empowered.

As a Connector, your core responsibilities are to:

- Help individuals identify their needs, priorities, and personal goals
- Understand and respond to the social determinants of health that affect well-being
- Provide ongoing encouragement, guidance, and follow-up—not just making a referral
- Bridge gaps between systems, including healthcare, social care, voluntary, and cultural sectors
- Build and strengthen partnerships with local community organizations

Photo: Shadowland equinox parade in Dentonia park, 2024.

How service providers support as Connectors

Being a Connector is about more than giving a referral, it's about building trusting relationships and walking alongside people in their journey. It's gaining knowledge on suitable resources in the community and making an effective connection. Connectors work alongside a larger team of other staff and partner organizations, both internally and externally.

Integrating arts and social prescribing into healthcare practice means recognizing that health is shaped by more than medical care alone. Healthcare providers can connect patients to creative and cultural activities that improve mental well-being, reduce stress, and foster social connections. By incorporating these opportunities into care plans, providers help patients address social and emotional needs alongside physical health. This approach supports holistic well-being and encourages patients to engage with their communities in meaningful ways.

Build trusting relationships

A Connector helps people find their way to the right community supports by building relationships, listening to what matters most, and making meaningful connections that support health and well-being.

- For example, you might listen to a client's goals and connect them to a local arts program that helps them feel less isolated and more at home in their community.

Assess holistic needs & plan personalized care

A Connector checks in on a person's overall health and well-being to understand their distinct needs and notice any challenges or barriers, like language or transportation, that might make it hard for them to access support.

- For example, you might meet with a participant to talk about how they're feeling and learn that limited English makes it difficult for them to join local community programs.

Strengthen communities

A Connector looks for gaps in services and advocates for new community supports, while also gathering feedback from participants to help improve programs and better meet community needs.

- For example, you might find that there are no nearby transportation options to a local community program and work with the organization to arrange a shuttle.

Collaborate across systems

A Connector works with healthcare, social services, and community organizations to support continuity of care and help individuals access programs, activities, and services while addressing barriers.

- For example, you might coordinate with a social worker and a community arts group to help a newcomer access a free creative workshop.

Connects People to Resources

A Connector link individuals to community programs, cultural activities, support groups, volunteer opportunities, and other services while helping to reduce barriers such as language, cost, and transportation.

- For example, a connect a newcomer client to a free community art program and help arrange interpretation support/ transportation so they can participate.



Photo: Hubs of Expressive Arts for Life (HEAL) program participants at the Ontario Art Gallery, 2023.

Putting social prescribing into practice

Social prescribing is not a single referral, but an evolving relationship. Each step is designed to ensure participants are not simply directed onward, but genuinely supported to explore, engage with, and benefit from their chosen path to well-being. While the steps are presented in a linear way, participants may return to any stage at any point during a session, and practitioners should remain open to flexibility. This is an iterative process, with each step potentially taking one to three sessions, depending on the pace set by the participant.





Shruthi's Family

Shruthi moved to Canada two years ago with her three children aged 3, 7, and 15. The challenges of settling in a new country and learning a new language, has made Shruthi feel disconnected from her children and her family back home. Shruthi shares how she wishes to find community in Toronto and strengthen her connection with her children.





Photo: AccessPoint on Jane summer sewing program in the park, 2025

Getting to know more...

Needs assessments play an important role in supporting social prescribing by helping providers understand what matters most to a client. They offer insight into a person's needs, strengths, preferences, and goals, creating a foundation for supports that are meaningful and relevant to their life.

There is no single “best” assessment tool. Effective assessment approaches are those that are adapted to both the client and the setting. The choice or development of a tool should be informed by how clients prefer to share their experiences:

- Narrative conversation vs. a structured form
- Language, cultural norms, and cultural relevance
- Culturally affirming and trauma-informed practices
- Service provider's practice context and reporting requirements

Assessment tools or models should be revisited regularly to ensure they remain responsive to changing client needs and circumstances.

Appendix 1 provides a non-exhaustive overview of commonly used tools in the social services sector and may serve as a starting point for identifying approaches that best fit your community.

Photo: Women's settlement program witnessing their own artwork displayed at the Textile Museum of Canada collective exhibit, 2024.



Getting started

Once you have selected or developed a needs assessment, you can begin the conversation about social prescribing with the client. The first meeting focuses on building trust and working together to explore the client's interests, strengths, and goals related to their overall well-being.

This first conversation sets the foundation for social prescribing. During this conversation, aim to:

- Build a trusting, person-centered relationship that supports open discussion
- Explore the client's interests, values, and strengths, including possible interest in arts and culture
- Identify non-medical needs that affect health and wellbeing
- Notice barriers or gaps such as isolation, housing, language access, or transportation
- Clarify goals and priorities to guide appropriate supports and referrals
- Create a safe and welcoming space using trauma informed and culturally responsive practices

Before making any referrals, take time to talk with the client about arts, community, or wellness programs that may fit their needs and interests, and remind them that social prescribing is voluntary, flexible, and guided by their choices.

Motivational interviewing is a communication style that helps build trust and engagement by focusing on the client's values, supporting choice, and encouraging readiness for change without pressure.

During your initial meeting and assessment, consider using the following skills:

- **Open ended questions:** "How do you usually spend your time?"
- **Affirmations:** "I appreciate you taking the time to talk today"
- **Reflections:** "It sounds like you've been feeling isolated"
- **Summaries:** "Let me check that I understand what we've talked about so far..."
- **Information exchange:** Recognizing that both the service provider and the client have expertise, and sharing information in a way that responds to what the client is saying and asking
- **Active listening:** Maintaining eye contact (when culturally appropriate), using an open posture, and showing engagement through small cues such as nodding

Arts & Culture Social Prescribing Assessment (AC-SPA)

The **Arts and Culture Social Prescribing Assessment (AC-SPA)** (see *Appendix 2*) is a guide for conversations about social prescribing arts and culture. The AC-SPA was developed using trauma-informed principles, including building trust, ensuring psychological and physical safety, collaborating with clients, supporting self-determination, and using a strengths-based approach (Miller et al., 2019). This guide should be tested and adapted to fit the needs of your local community.

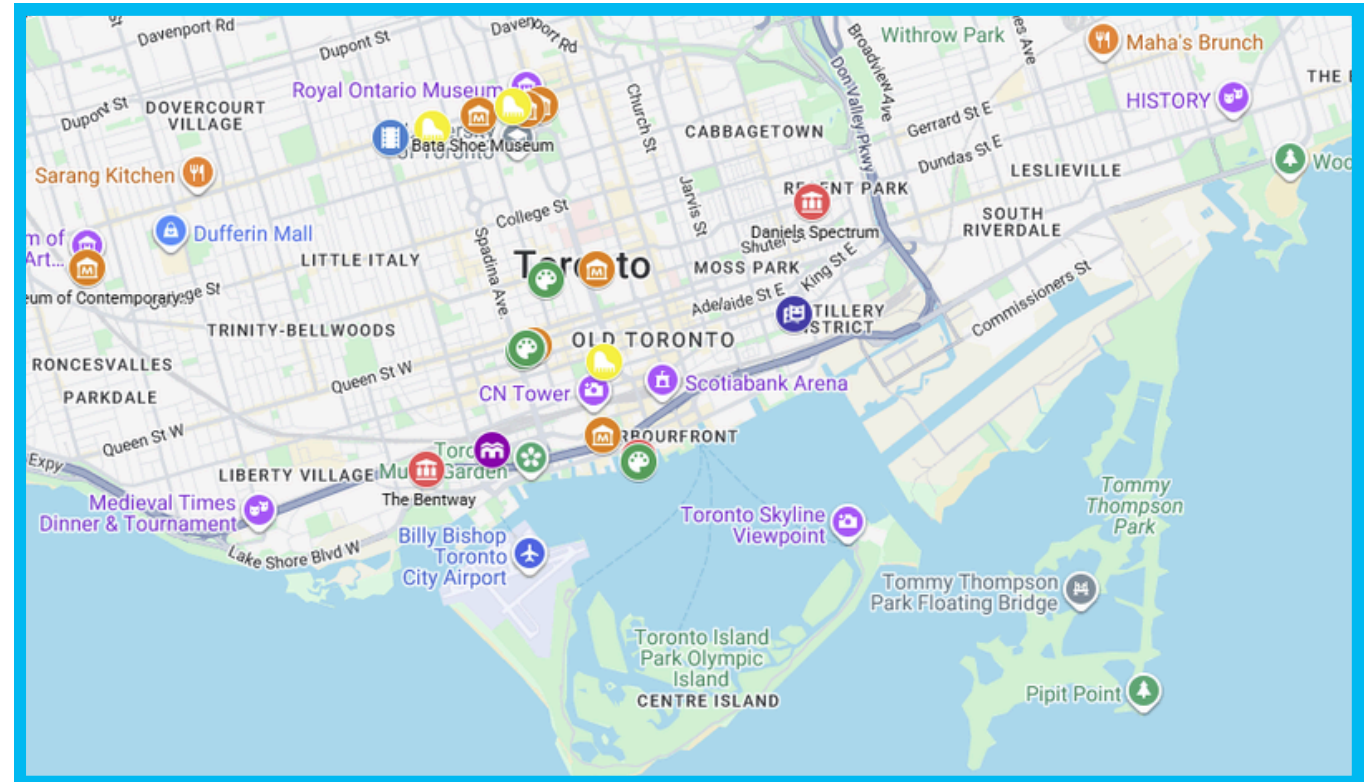


Making the connections

Arts and culture activities are not for everyone. Social prescribing is a client-centered and empowering process that focuses on each person's needs and self-identified goals. Service providers should share all options, including possible benefits and risks, and it is up to the client to decide how they want to move forward. If a client shows interest in arts and culture through the intake or needs assessment, a more detailed assessment can be done.

Included on the map are the following sites:

- **Community and cultural centres:** Inclusive neighbourhood spaces that offer programs, workshops, and events to support creativity, connection, and community engagement.
- **Museums:** Spaces that preserve and share history, culture, and knowledge through exhibits and educational experiences.
- **Music engagement:** Opportunities to listen to, learn, or participate in music through performances, classes, and community music-making.
- **Art galleries:** Venues that showcase visual art and provide spaces for reflection, learning, and creative inspiration.
- **Cinema and film:** Places to experience storytelling through movies, screenings, and film festivals.
- **Theatre:** Live performances that bring stories to life through acting, music, and stage production.
- **Community arts:** Local, participatory art programs of all ages and backgrounds to create together.



A Google Map has been created to help newcomers explore arts and culture locations across the City of Toronto. It highlights accessible spaces such as galleries, community arts centres, festivals, and free cultural events, making it easier for people to discover opportunities for creative engagement and connection in the city. This resource is designed to support social prescribing by linking individuals to welcoming and inclusive arts and culture experiences.

[Access the digital map](#)





Checking in and adjusting the plan

The follow-up and re-assessment step is important to ensure the activity feels accessible and supportive for the client, address any barriers early, and keep the plan aligned with the client's goals and comfort level. In the follow-up meeting:

- Revisit how the client is engaging with the referral — what's working and what isn't.
- Identify any new or ongoing barriers, such as transportation, scheduling, comfort, or interest.
- Create space for honest reflection and feedback in a way that is free from pressure or judgment.
- Affirm that the client's well-being and autonomy remain at the centre of the process.
- Strengthen the relationship through consistency, compassion, and collaboration.

Follow-up is also an opportunity for the relationship to deepen. It reassures the client that they are not alone, that their voice and needs matter, and that feedback is valued. It allows practitioners to respond with care, adjust support as needed, and walk alongside the client as their journey evolves.

1 Check-in about how things are going

Use open-ended questions and empathetic language:

- "How are you feeling about the activity we discussed?"
- "What has been going well so far?"
- "Have you had a chance to attend or try it out?"
- "Did anything surprise you, or feel different than expected?"

2 Explore barriers and make adjustments

Encourage reflection on why something may not be working:

- "Is the program what you expected? Does it feel like a good fit?"
- "Was anything hard, like timing, transportation or language?"
- "Is there anything I can help shift or adjust?"

3 Review and reassess goals

- Collaboratively review goals to ensure they are still relevant and the activities are having their intended outcome
- If anything has changed, support the client to adjust or develop new goals

4 Plan what's next together

- Decide together on next steps: continue, pause, or try a new path!
- Choose the follow-up format: phone, in-person, virtual
- Schedule a check-in time (anywhere from 2 weeks to 3 months)



Documenting growth and change

Measuring and documenting change looks different for every connector and organization, but it is key to understanding how social prescribing affects the client's well-being, connection, and quality of life.

- Demonstrate impact to stakeholders (e.g., government funders, community partners, internal teams)
- Assess whether the intervention is achieving meaningful outcomes for clients
- Inform program improvement and sustainability through evidence-based insights
- Support future funding applications, reports, and advocacy efforts

Through this process, you gain a deeper understanding of how arts and culture engagement supports the client's journey and overall well-being. Documenting this work creates data that can be used in impact reports, funding renewals, and organizational storytelling. These insights can also guide future referrals and strengthen evidence for the value of social prescribing in holistic care.

Use EMRs or shared data platforms to monitor referral patterns, appointment attendance, and emergency room use. If using surveys or questionnaires, keep them short and client-friendly to avoid survey fatigue.





Tools and tips for monitoring impact

Assessments, referrals, feedback, and follow-ups should be documented to measure the change throughout the social prescribing process. When engaging with clients regarding their successes, challenges, changes, keep the following in mind:

Ask reflective, outcome-focused questions, such as:

- “What has changed for you since starting this activity?”
- “Do you feel more connected or included in your community?”
- “Has this activity affected how you feel in your day-to-day life?”

Ensure shared understanding by clearly communicating:

- What information is being collected
- Who is collecting it
- When and how it is recorded

Collect both qualitative and quantitative information, including:

- Participation: Are clients attending, and how often?
- Self-reported well-being: Has the client noticed changes in mood, confidence, or social connection?
- Functional outcomes: Has participation supported well-being, community connection, or reduced isolation?

Use Electronic Medical Records or shared data platforms to monitor:

- Referral patterns
- Appointment attendance
- Hospital or emergency room use
- Ensure data systems are secure, consistent, and compliant with privacy requirements

Photo: Women's settlement program at Textile museum community makers program, 2024.



Learning resources

[Alliance for Healthier Communities](#)

Based in Toronto, the Alliance for Healthier Communities represents a network of primary health care organizations across Ontario, advocating for a more sustainable, accessible, and low-barrier health system.

[Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing](#)

The CISP is a Canada-wide collaborative that promotes social prescribing among practitioners, academics, stakeholders, and researchers, offering education and events to support its implementation in practice.

[Vital Signs: Arts & Belonging](#)

Vital Signs offers a resource highlighting the benefits and impact of arts and culture, particularly for newcomers, emphasizing its role in fostering connection and a sense of belonging.

[World Health Organization](#)

[Social Prescribing Toolkit](#)

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed a community-level social prescribing toolkit that clarifies implementation approaches and supports collaborative, team-based practice among practitioners.

[Arts on Prescription Field Guide](#)

This field guide focuses on arts and culture social prescribing, supporting providers to implement “arts on prescription” to address social determinants of health and enhance community wellbeing.

[Access Alliance Arts for Family Health](#)

This digital platform centralizes knowledge for practitioners, leaders, and researchers integrating arts-based mental health interventions, sharing best practices to strengthen newcomer services and support systems.



Photo: AccessPoint on Jane engaging in natural pigment painting in the park, 2025

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Photo: AccessPoint on Danforth engaging in community singing program with Rishi community artist, 2025

Appendix 1: Commonly used needs assessment and goal setting tools

Documentation Type	Purpose	Scope	Format	Common Use
Biopsychosocial Assessment	Provide a comprehensive evaluation of biological, psychological, spiritual, and social factors	Holistically covers medical history, mental health, social context, strengths, and risks	Narrative or structured form based on the worker and client choice/need	Intake evaluations, care planning, risk assessment
5 P's Needs Assessment	Identify client needs, strengths, and priorities to guide person-centred, non-clinical interventions	Explores practical needs, social factors, protective strengths, and systemic barriers	Five-part structure - Presenting concerns, Predisposing factors, Precipitating factors, Perpetuating factors, and Protective factors	Inform care planning, referrals, and goal setting with community supports
SOAP Notes	Document client interactions by linking social needs, goals, and interventions to health and well-being outcomes	Includes psychosocial and practical information, the social determinants of health, client strengths, barriers, referrals, and progress over time	Four-part structure - Subjective, Objective, Assessment, and Plan - organizes client perspectives, observable information, professional interpretation, and next steps	Intake assessment, care coordination, care continuity, accountability, and evaluation
SMART Goals	Translate client-identified priorities into clear, achievable actions	Focuses on short- to medium-term social, practical, and wellbeing outcomes	Structured - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound	Guide care planning, track progress, and evaluate outcomes

Appendix 2: Arts & culture social prescribing assessment (AC-SPA)

Arts & Culture Social Prescribing Assessment (AC-SPA)

PURPOSE

This tool is created as a conversation guide for service providers assessing clients for social prescribing arts and culture. The questions should be adapted for client and organizational needs as some questions may have already been answered in the initial assessment. Once a client has identified an interest in arts and culture, the AC-SPA can be used to assess the clients interests, readiness, and goals to guide referrals and develop a follow-up plan.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

1. Interests and Creative Experience

What kinds of art, culture, or creative activities feel interesting, familiar, or comforting to you?

2. Culture, Identity, and Belonging

Are there cultural traditions, creative practices, or communities that feel important to you or that you would like to reconnect with?

3. Social Preferences

How would you like to take part in arts or cultural activities?

On my own With someone I know In a group I am not sure yet

How much social connection feels right for you right now?

4. Access and Supports

Are any of these factors relevant to your participation in arts and culture activities?

Cost Transportation Accessibility needs Scheduling Language
 Childcare Energy or health Other: _____

What supports would make participation easier right now?

Arts & Culture Social Prescribing Assessment (AC-SPA)

5. Comfort and Readiness

How do you feel about trying a creative or cultural activity at this time?

Comfortable Somewhat comfortable Unsure Not ready right now

What would help you feel safer or more comfortable?

6. Hopes and Goals

What do you hope this experience will help you with?

Feeling less stressed Improved mood Connection with others
 Confidence Routine and structure Joy or meaning
 Other: _____

How will you know this experience is working for you?

Summary and Next Steps

Strengths and interests shared:

Barriers and supports identified:

Possible arts and culture options:

Follow-up plan:

This tool is designed as a conversation guide for service providers exploring arts and culture social prescribing with clients. Feel free to adapt the questions as some may have already been covered in the initial assessment. Once a client expresses interest in arts and culture, the AC-SPA can help you explore their interests, readiness, and goals, guiding referrals and supporting the development of a follow-up plan.

[Download here](#)





Photo: Participants engage in outdoor drumming part of Shadowland park workshop, 2025.



New Beginnings for Newcomers.

Supporting newcomer well-being through creative connections

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