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### Impact of an Arts-Based Mental Health Stigma Reduction Program on Youth: Quantitative and Qualitative Evaluation of the WeARTolerance Program

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Persistent barriers like stigma and limited awareness, restrain helpseeking behaviors, particularly among disadvantaged youth struggling with mental health issues. The necessity of addressing this issue is underscored by the invisibility of mental health concerns, emphasizing the urgent need for stigma reduction and greater literacy. This mixed-method research, divided into two different studies, aimed to analyze the impact of an arts-based program in the reduction of mental health social stigma. The program, based on psychoeducational, artistic, and expressive activities was developed with the aim of offering an alternative and engaging approach for young people. In Study 1, the program was implemented with 125 youths ( $M_{age} = 13.70$ ;  $SD_{age} = 2.06$ ). Social stigma was assessed using the Attribution Questionnaire AQ-9 for adults and AQ-8-C for children and adolescents in pre, post and 6-month follow-up). In study 2, nine participants aged 12 to 16 years old participated in focus groups to assess qualitative data regarding their experience in the program. In study 1, a growth curve model examined the attitudinal outcomes over time for stigma, with Age, and previous psychological problems as fixed covariates and random intercepts for participants. The results showed that stigma ( $b = -0.479$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(214.38) = -9.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) decreased over time. In study 2 participants expressed satisfaction with the activities and format of the program, acknowledging the relevance of the activities while expressing concerns about young people's ability to connect with the topic. Following implementation, all participants reported overall satisfaction, emphasizing positive aspects like organization, duration, and activity sequence. Results suggest that arts-based interventions represent a promising approach for addressing mental health-related stigma, facilitating positive change, particularly among youths. Further research and investment are warranted to fully explore and maximize the impact of these interventions on mental health outcomes.

#### Biography

Isabel Santos has a PhD in Psychology from ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon, a degree in Clinical and Counseling Psychology and a master's degree in Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies from Lusófona University. She is co-director of the master's degree in Clinical and Health Psychology at the School of Psychology and Life Sciences and is an integrated member of the HEI-Lab Research Unit: Digital Human-Environment Interaction Lab at Lusófona University. She collaborates as a researcher in various funded projects in the field of psychology, particularly in mental health.

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