

# EMORY DARK ARTS

Emory Dark Arts is a collective of individuals - artists and not, those with mental illness and not - who believe in the value of artistic platforms for meaningful, honest communication about mental health. In short, we are an advocacy group which creates and promotes initiatives that destigmatize mental illness and generate impactful change on campus and beyond. We welcome everyone regardless of background in the arts or mental health, and with whatever level of interest in being open or not about their experiences.

Emory Dark Arts holds weekly meetings during which members discuss relevant mental health issues - from suicide rates among college students to maintaining positive body image - during critical dialogues and are encouraged to share their own lived experiences as they feel comfortable. In addition to meetings, Dark Arts has several keystone initiatives which are enacted every academic year. Most prominent is the Mental Health and Well-Being Showcase, a 90-minute performance in which students display an artistic piece they have created and workshopped

with other performers throughout the semester. These pieces range from singing and dancing to monologues and spoken word poetry. Through weekly workshops, performers are provided a space to process through the mental health experiences which inspire their work and gain feedback from their fellow performers. Further, visual artists are provided the opportunity to showcase their artwork in our gallery the day of the performance. Another signature event is Mental Health Monologues, a theater production structured similarly to The Vagina Monologues in which students write and perform short scenes about their experiences with mental health. Other initiatives include mental health town halls, vigils for Suicide Prevention Month, film screenings and discussions, and open mic nights.

Perhaps most importantly, Dark Arts serves as a large network of informal peer mental health support. With over 200 members in our GroupMe, requests for support and encouragement are always met, and when a Dark Arts member falls ill or struggles, the community rallies—offering care packages,

therapist recommendations, and on-campus resources. Dark Arts aims to fill the gaps in support and services on campus by providing a space for students to share their experiences without having to sanitize their reality and stories. Dark Arts recognizes that while society has begun to embrace remedies such as meditation, yoga, and even therapy, too often we fail to provide room to simply sit with and accept people as they are in a given moment, even when it is less comfortable than hearing the happy ending of a story that happened long ago. While we do not attempt to be therapists, we feel there is tremendous value in providing a space for students to walk into a club meeting and say “I had a terrible panic attack last night, and I’m still really shaken up” or stand on stage and reveal how hard it is for them not self-harm every day, without feeling judged or shamed. At its core, Dark Arts is a caring and supportive community which utilizes art as a tool for authentic expression and honest dialogue surrounding lived mental health experiences.


## FAST FACTS:

- The Emory Dark Arts name is inspired by the notion that we need not shy away from the “dark” and broken parts of our lives but can instead illuminate these aspects of ourselves in a way that can connect with and inspire others and ourselves to achieve healing and peace. It is also a play on words from Harry Potter and has the same abbreviation as Dumbledore’s Army.
- During the 2018-2019 school year, Emory Dark Arts reached over 600 students through showcases, theater productions, visual art galleries, panels, and collaborations.





## CHLOE CAMP

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“WHEN WE FAIL TO ADDRESS CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH, OUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES SUFFER IN SILENCE. BUT WHEN WE BRING CONVERSATIONS AND EXPERIENCES TO LIGHT, WE OPEN PATHWAYS FOR HEALING AND RECOVERY.”

## GETTING STARTED

Emory Dark Arts started in the fall of 2016 as a small, unchartered organization on Emory University’s campus. It began through the efforts of three seniors who recognized the need for a space for engaging in authentic dialogue about mental health as well as utilizing the subversive power of art to resist the stigma and silence surrounding these topics. Initially weekly meetings centered around creating new initiatives on campus to establish a presence in the Emory community. Each week members gathered in a small classroom to organize events that have since become signature projects of Dark Arts. Dark Arts had its first Mental Health and Well-Being Showcase in November 2016. Close to 100 students, faculty, and Emory employees were in attendance. The showcase was used not only as a platform for students’ expression but also as a means to draw attention to significant gaps in Emory’s mental health resources. For example, speeches were given about students’ experiences spending months on the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) waitlist prior to being seen regularly by a counselor. Additionally, students spoke to the lack of diversity within CAPS as well as the inadequacy in offering students only seven free counseling sessions. Furthermore, in its first year, Emory Dark Arts leaders spent significant time meeting with Emory personnel to increase transparency in the CAPS process, illuminate alternative resources on campus, influence disability services policy as it relates to mental health, and increase training of Residence Life student staff regarding mental health crises response.

In the spring of 2017, the seniors who began Dark Arts passed the torch of leadership onto a small group of first year students who took on the challenge of further establishing Dark Arts has a legitimate student group on Emory’s campus. Throughout its conception year, Dark Arts had little organizational structure with no executive board or staff positions. It was in the fall of 2017 Dark Arts gained its first official Executive Director along with two Directors of Performance, one Director of Campus Collaborations, one Director of Communications, one Treasurer, and 10 additional staff members. This structure allowed the organization to undertake significantly more events including a theater production entitled Mental Health Monologues, collaborations with Delta Phi

Epsilon Sorority for Anorexia Nervosa and Related Disorders Week, and a film screening of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds’ documentary Looking for Luke among many others. Dark Arts gained its official chartership in the fall of 2018 and is continuing to expand its breadth into the Emory community and beyond.

## POTENTIAL BARRIERS

One of the biggest challenges in creating a mental health group on campus is establishing an organizational structure that holds team members accountable while also respecting each individual’s limitations and how these limitations might be affected by each member’s own mental health conditions. In establishing Dark Arts’ organizational structure, I found that oftentimes leadership team members were unable to complete tasks and attend events because mental health conditions such as depression and social anxiety impacted their ability to contribute in the ways they envisioned and hoped for themselves. As a mental health advocacy group, all members understand and have great empathy toward these challenges; however, from a logistical standpoint, meeting organizational goals proved exceedingly challenging as often times the burden of responsibility for an event or project would fall on only one or two leaders who might sacrifice their own mental health in order to compensate for others. As time goes on, the leadership team began to establish a philosophy that supporting the mental health of one another and also protecting our own mental health was far more important than any event or project we might do as an organization. While this sometimes results in a different outcome than originally envisioned, we believe that a postponed showcase or small turnout is a far better outcome than compromising our own self-care for the sake of advocacy. Establishing a culture which invites clear communication about boundaries and limits has allowed for both a successful organization and also mutual, healthy support among leadership members.

Another challenge in establishing a mental health organization stems from administrative fears from the university that we as student mental health advocates are unequipped to handle the potential consequences that could result from discussing such difficult and personal topics. Initially, Emory administration

pushed back against Dark Arts' meetings and showcases in fear that we were posing ourselves as "art therapists," stepping outside of our scope and role as students. This mistrust was perpetuated by Dark Arts drawing attention and providing a platform to speak about the flaws in Emory's approaches to mental health care for its students. However, with time, Emory Counseling and Psychological Services began to remedy some of the causes of student complaints, and with these improvements, Emory Dark Arts began to refer more members to their services and invite CAPS staff to showcases and other events. This partnership allowed more collaborative forms of advocacy to take place and eventually led to a strong relationship between the organization and Emory personnel.

Finally, a significant challenge in serving as a mental health organization leader is setting personal boundaries while also supporting members through mental health challenges. This proves especially difficult when members have had negative experiences with on-campus resources. Setting clear expectations and communicating limits with peers is essential, and I have found that creating networks of mutual support within the organization can help tremendously. For example, the Emory Dark Arts GroupMe is often used as a mean to share resources, offer encouragement, and develop friendships within the community.

