

Main Interventions for Mental Health in Albania in Recent Years and Alternative Activities

Assoc. Prof Albana A. Fico, MD PhD

2026

Trends in mental health cases

- **50% rise in 1Q23 vs 1Q22**

Official data show a sharp increase in psychiatric hospital admissions after 2021, with a roughly 50% rise in the first quarter of 2023 compared with the same period in 2022 (suggesting that many people are still reaching care only when symptoms become severe).

- **Pre-COVID**

Surveys and clinical reports indicate that anxiety, depression, and psychological distress remained higher than pre-2020, especially among women, older adults, and those with prior vulnerabilities, even as acute pandemic-related stress began to ease.



Policy and System Reforms

01 Mental Health Action Plan

The Mental Health Action Plan 2023–2026 reflects a formal recognition that mental-health disorders surged after COVID-19, and it aims to increase capacity, reduce stigma, and strengthen prevention and early-intervention approaches.

02 MoH and WHO

The Ministry of Health and WHO-supported programs have put more emphasis on integrating mental-health services into primary care and expanding community-based psychosocial support, but implementation is uneven and mostly centered in urban areas.

03 Post-2021

After 2021, mental-health problems in Albania remained elevated compared with pre-pandemic levels, but there were also some signs of improvement and increased policy attention, especially around hospital-based care and workforce support.



Policy and System Reforms (contd)

01 Listen without judging

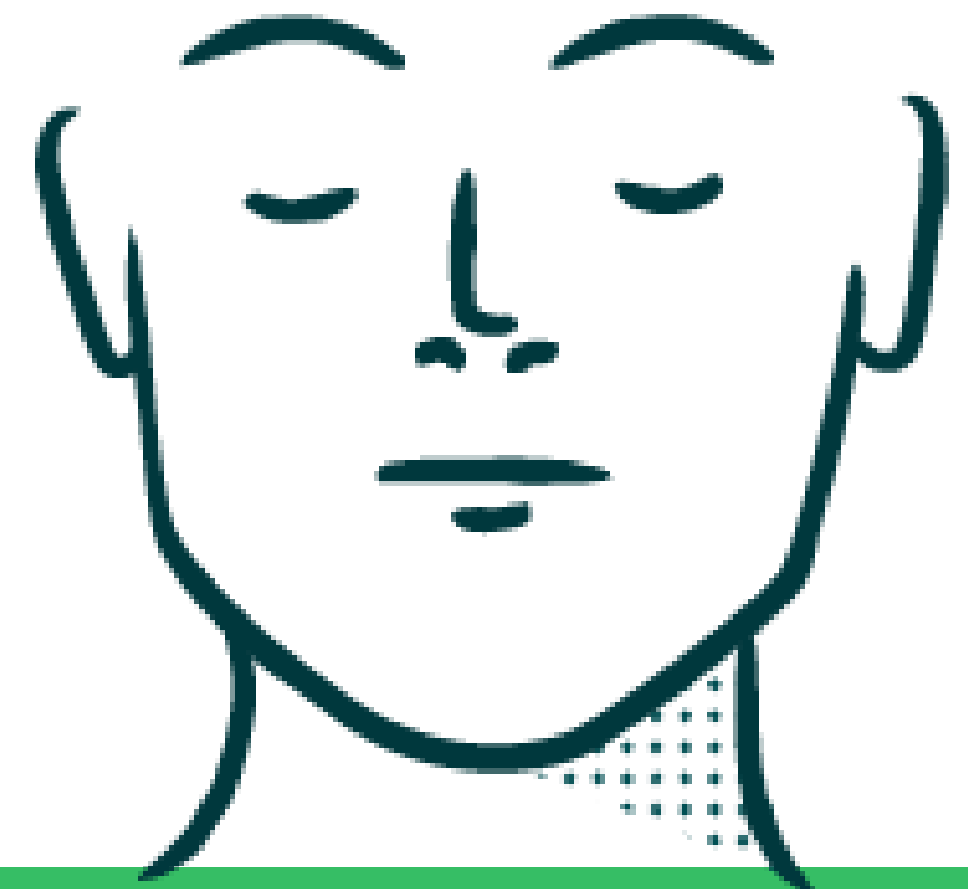
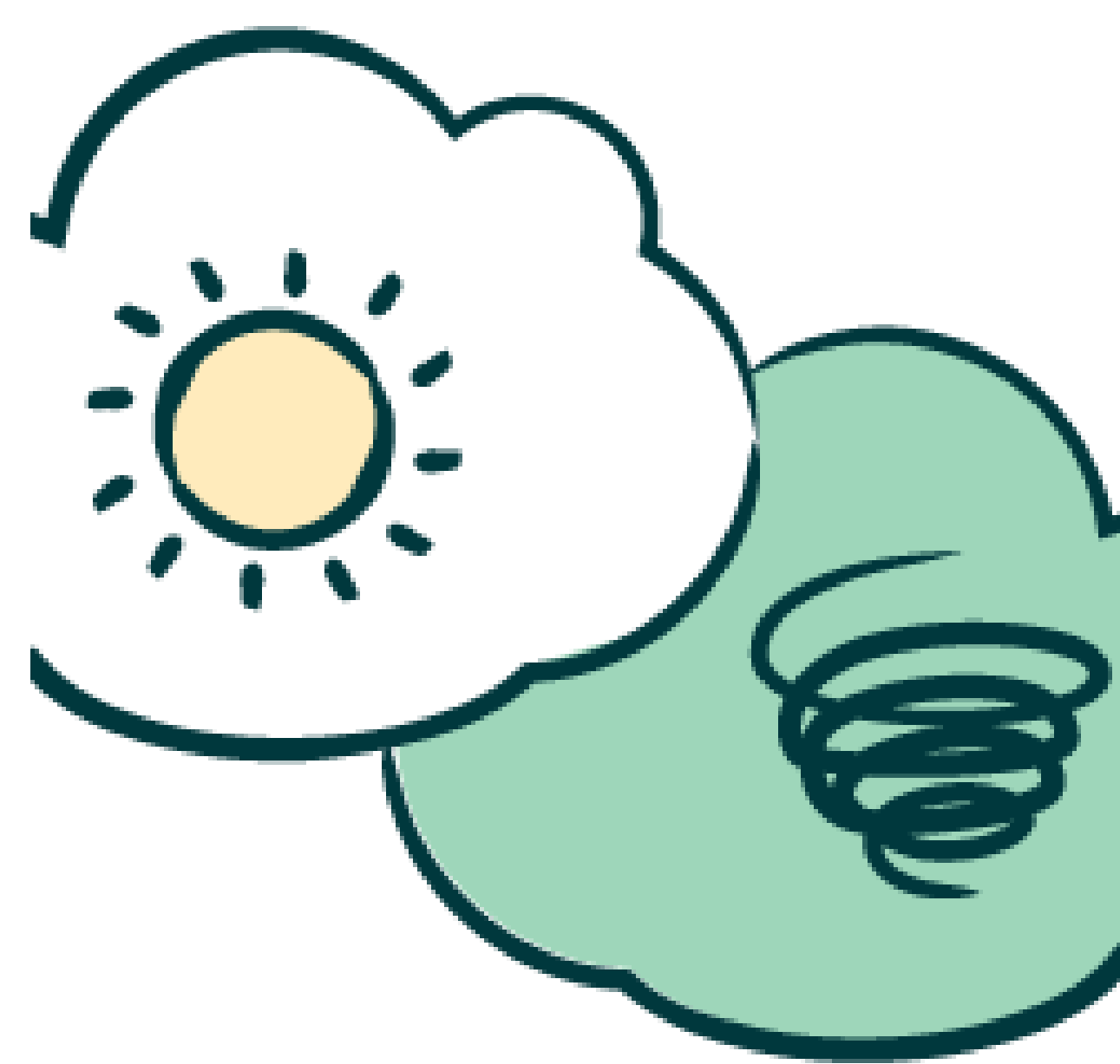
Between 2020 and 2023, the government has reduced psychiatric beds (from 900 to 600 beds) and shifted to community-based care, including supported homes and outpatient services.

02 Show empathy and understanding

The 2023–2026 Mental Health Action Plan has a total budget of about 3.5 billion Albanian lek (under 30 million GBP), which works out to less than 10 million GBP per year and is widely seen as insufficient to transform the system.

03 Show empathy and understanding

In 2023–2024, WHO-related data show Albania is spending about 142 USD per capita on mental health.



Service availability and Access

Inpatient care

Inpatient care remains more developed than outpatient or community services, with a very low ratio of outpatient visits per inpatient admission, and long stay hospitalizations are still common.

Access to services

Access is uneven across regions: services are concentrated in major cities (Tirana, Shkodra), leaving rural areas underserved and many people relying on informal or no care.



Workforce

01 Workers

Studies on Healthcare workers and residual stress showed that nurses and other healthcare workers showed that anxiety, depression, and stress were significantly higher during the pandemic but have declined post-2021, though worries and burnout-related symptoms persist.

02 Professional support

At the same time, structured psychological support and debriefing programs in hospitals remain limited, which means the long-term mental-health burden on staff is still under-addressed.

03 Albania ranking

Albania ranks among the lowest in Europe in mental-health workforce density, especially for child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists, despite a small increase in specialists since 2020.



COVID

01 COVID-19

During 2020–2022, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted face-to-face services, increased isolation, and appeared to have worsened mental-health needs, even though schizophrenia-related hospitalizations stayed roughly stable.

02 Hospitalizations

Alcohol- and drug-related hospitalizations fell in 2020, possibly due to reduced access or reporting, while demand for mental-health services appears to have grown.

03 Anxiety rising

Studies during 2020–2021 found elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among the general adult population, with mild-to-moderate depressive symptoms reported in a large share of respondents.



Impact of the Pandemic

01 High risk groups

Women and older adults emerged as especially vulnerable, showing higher rates of depressive symptoms and stress-related psychological distress linked to quarantine, fear of infection, and economic insecurity.

02 Reduced access

The effect on access to services, such as lockdowns and infection-control measures, disrupted in-person consultations, reduced face-to-face psychiatric visits, and limited family and community support, especially for people relying on public outpatient services.

03 Telemedicine

Digital or remote mental-health options were limited, so many who might have needed help (particularly in rural and low-income areas) could not switch to telehealth, effectively shrinking access.

04 Systematic risk

Meanwhile, system-level consequences during the pandemic drew attention to the chronic underfunding of mental health in Albania and triggered some WHO-supported initiatives to strengthen community-based and psychosocial support, but implementation has been slow.



Recent Interventions

01 National Plan of Mental Health (2023–2026)

One of the most important structural interventions is the fact that Albania has adopted the National Mental Health Plan 2023-2026. This plan is in line with the World Health Organization strategies and aims to integrate community services, prevention and awareness, support for vulnerable groups, empower individuals for independent lives.

02 Community Mental Health Centers in Albania

Ten new Community Center for Adult Mental Health (CCCM);
Three new Specialized Centers for Children and Teenagers (CCSHM-F/A)

03 Green Lines

Green line and other support lines

04 On-site psychologists

In Albania, it is a legal obligation to have the presence of psycho-social services in schools, but their implementation in practice still faces problems/challenges. Most schools (especially urban) have at least one psychologist. However, there is still a shortage of staff (often only one psychologist covers several schools), high workload, lack of resources and spaces, unequal service quality (urban vs rural)



Social Context and Challenges

- **Public perception**

Stigma, low public awareness, and distrust in formal services deter many people from seeking help, especially in rural and conservative communities.

- **Funding**

Funding remains low (around a few euros per capita per year), limiting human-resources expansion, training, and sustained community-based programs

- **Primary care**

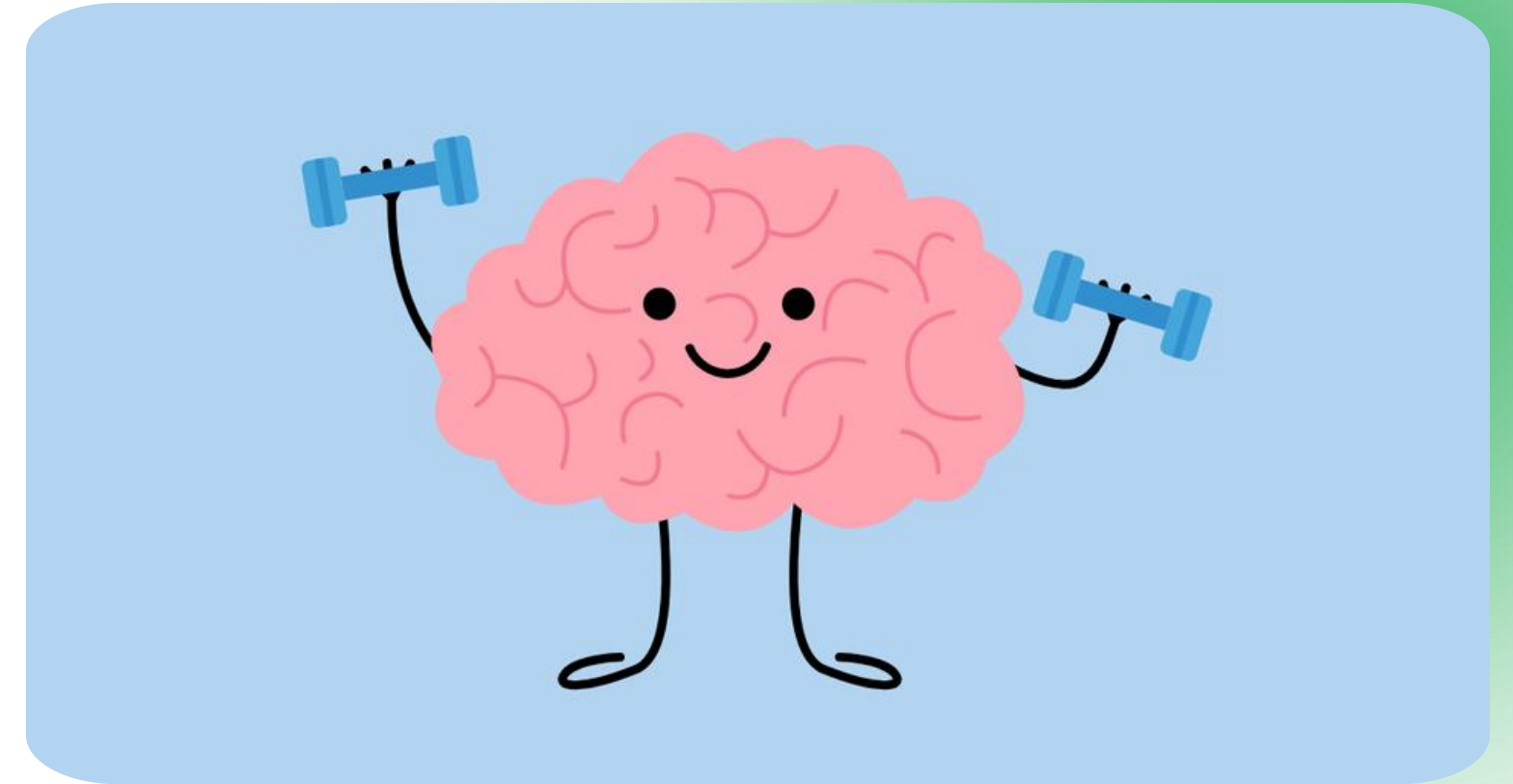
Overall, the crisis appears to have deepened the gap between rising mental-health needs and the capacity of the system, reinforcing the argument that integrating mental-health services into primary care and expanding community care is urgently needed.



Alternate Activities

01 **Establishment of Specialized Services – Kukes Multifunctional Center for Psychosocial Wellbeing**

Project supported by Terre des Hommes Albania + UNICEF + EU
The project is active in Kukes and serves as a psychosocial community model and includes activities such as art-therapy (drawing, painting), sports activities and games, psychological counseling, psycho-education



02 **Psychosocial Activities for Children**

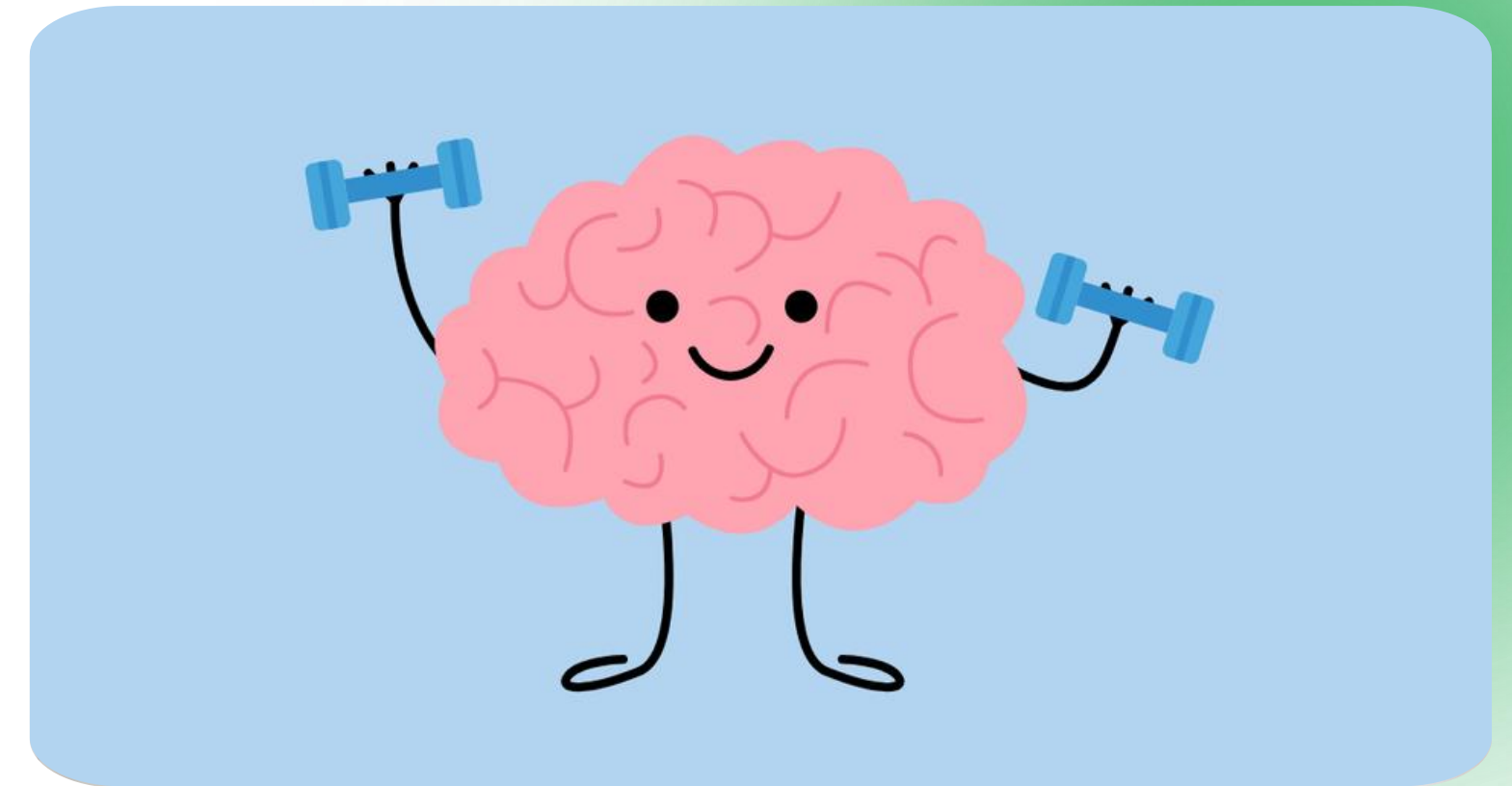
"The project supported by Terre des Hommes Albania and includes activities such as "movement, games and sport", group games (p.s. treasure hunt), creative and emotional activities, group work for communication and cooperation."

03 **Child Protection & Psychosocial Support Programme** supported by Terre des Hommes Albania and includes such psychological counseling activities, recreational activities, art and emotional expression, support for children victims of violence, etc.



Alternate Activities

- 04 UPSHIFT Albania Project**, supported by UNICEF and includes activities such as “Mental Health & Well-being projects”, youth clubs, creative projects (apps, podcast, art), stress and anxiety initiatives for young people
- 05 Unity in Care – Advancing Mental Health Support Systems Project** is a consortium of Terre des Hommes and regional partners. The project includes activities such as Movement, Games, Sports & Creativity (MGSC), child resilience programs, community psychosocial support.
- 06 Community-based Child Protection Programmes**
A project focused on vulnerable children and social integration supported by Save the Children Albania and includes activities such as art clubs and creativity, community sports, post-school activities, storytelling and drama.
- 07 Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies (MHPSS)**
UNICEF + WHO Albania project and includes such crisis interference activities, psychosocial community programs, child support and emergency adolescents.





Pictured: Trauma Informed Care" Training - 23 Jun 2023

For 5 days, psychologists and professionals who provide social services in the first line of treatment of minors in Tirana, Kukës, Lezhë, Shkodër, Fier, Elbasa, and Durrës were part of the workshop for trainers regarding the topic "Trauma Informed Care"

Terre De Hommes Albania



- 3,050 Children and youth benefitted from Terre des Hommes ' activities and assistance in 2024.
- 496 Parents were supported to improve their living conditions in 2024.
- 595 Professionals benefitted from capacity building in 2024.



Terre des Hommes is offering its mobile services for children! This time, the staff of the Multifunctional Community Center in Lezhë moved to Shënkollë where they engaged with the students of the "Lleshë Nikë Daka" school in psychosocial games.



Terre des Hommes offering classes for the children of the Roma community in local educational facilities

IPH Albania – Move and Be Happy



Activities for Age Groups

● Alternative activities

Alternative activities (art, crafts, sports and community programs) are among the most suitable and effective mental health interventions in Albania. When adapted according to age groups, they can function as powerful tools for prevention, psychosocial rehabilitation and community strengthening, especially in a limited resource system like the Albanian one.

● Challenges

Current challenges are lacking long-term structured programs, lack of sustainable funding, unequal urban-rural coverage. Considering the Albanian context and the possibilities for practical realization, priority should be simple and free activities, community-based (not just clinical) integrated into schools and municipalities, tailored to local culture.



Children 6-12 years

Focus: emotional expression, security, game, social development and can be applied to schools and post-school centers with very simple materials.

Arts & Creativity

- 01 My emotions today (drawing feelings)
- 02 Group painting in class/community center
- 03 Emotional masks (happy/sad/angry)
- 04 Stories with figures and illustrations



Children 6-12 years

Focus: emotional expression, security, game, social development and can be applied to schools and post-school centers with very simple materials.

Crafts

- 01 Paperwork and recyclable materials
- 02 Plastelin / cargle modeling
- 03 Collages (my friends / my family / my day)



Children 6-12 years

Focus: physical expression, stress relief, ways to view sports as health oriented activities rather than competition.

Physical Activity

- 01 Collaborative games
- 02 Outdoor games
- 03 Free play (sports)



Children 6-12 years

Focus: sense of belonging, community, expression of vulnerability. A way to create safe spaces for children to express themselves in a healthy way.

Community Activities

- 01 Weekly “feelings” class
- 02 Show & tell (group sharing)



Thank You

**Take Care of
Your Mind**

... and greetings from my beautiful
Albania!

