

How arts can help improve your mental health

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We are facing huge public health challenges in the UK. Mental ill health accounts for more than 20 percent of these challenges, more than cancer and cardiovascular disease¹. As the number of people with long-term conditions increases and with an ageing population who may experience high levels of physical inactivity and social isolation, innovative and effective treatments are needed, more than ever²! The arts seem to have an important role to play in this – through offering help, promoting well-being and creating a space for social connection.



We've looked at the added value of the arts and how they can keep us happy and in good mental health:

Being engaged in the Art

Do you recognise a feeling of joy that you can get when taking part in cultural activities such as music, museums, dance groups and theatre? Getting involved with the arts can have powerful and lasting effects on health. It can help to protect against a range of mental health conditions, help manage mental ill health and support recovery³.

There are many ways to engage in arts and improve your mental health:

Art and health programmes led by artists and musicians can deliver health benefits through participatory arts programmes and arts engagement in everyday life. When we talk about the arts, we include visual and performing arts, such as traditional craft, sculpture, digital art, text, dance, film, literature, music, singing, gardening and the culinary arts.

"Arts and creativity are an important part of the programmes we run at the Mental Health Foundation, art can be a different and fun way to express and talk about emotion."

Jolie Goodman, Programmes Manager for Empowerment and Later life.

Arts can make a powerful contribution to our mental health

Engaging in the arts seems to be growing in popularity as a way to improve your wellbeing. Participating in the arts can enable people to deal with a wide range of mental ill health conditions and psychological distress. The best part is that it helps people to improve their mental health through creativity. Making art is helping many people express themselves, without having to use words^{4,5}.

Arts can create a feeling of community

The arts also help at a community level. As we age, we might face isolation through a loss of social connections, such as friends, family and workplace - as well as other limitations such as decreasing physical health. Through getting involved in arts programmes, people in later life can rebuild their social connections and extend existing support in their communities. Getting in touch with others helps in alleviating loneliness and isolation. This is also true for care homes, where arts activities can help increase social interactions between residents and residents and staff which can improve mood and wellbeing⁶.

At the Mental Health Foundation, we are starting a new project. Creating Communities is an 18 months project funded by the Mercers Trust. We are facilitating peer groups in partnership with Anchor Hanover Housing using creativity and access to the outdoors to improve wellbeing and social connectedness for tenants in different types of later life housing scheme. In terms of creativity we will use paintings that people may be familiar with to begin conversations about emotion and build on these.

We will help participants to use different materials to produce artwork that is relevant to them. Even if they don't think of themselves as creative, we want to create an environment that encourages them to have fun and be playful. It may be that people are interested in bringing their memories to life.

The arts valuable role in mental health is being recognised

More and more people now appreciate that the arts and culture can play a valuable role in helping people who have mental health problems. As we've noted: engaging in arts, social activities and interaction within our communities can help with major challenges such as ageing and loneliness. It can help to boost confidence and make us feel more engaged and resilient. Besides these benefits, art engagement also alleviates anxiety, depression and stress.

The arts and health economics – it just makes sense

Since it can be used as a non-medical approach to preventing mental health problems it could help save money in the health service and social care. Making art can enable people to take greater responsibility of their own health and wellbeing by helping maintain levels of independency and curiosity and improve the quality of life by bringing greater joy⁷.



We have posted this blog that details the potential value of arts for mental health considering the new MARCH network. The MARCH Network is one of 8 new national networks funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) as part of the 2018 Cross-Council Mental Health Plus call to further research into mental health. The Mental Health Foundation is one of the collaborating partners in this network, which is led by Dr Daisy Fancourt (University College London).

Learn about the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival

One way that the Mental Health Foundation supports using the arts to improve mental health is through the annual Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF). Now one of the largest festivals of its kind in the world, SMHAF brings together communities, artists and activists from all over Scotland to be creative and engage with arts events exploring mental health, including film, theatre, literature, visual arts, dance and comedy.

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