



Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

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What is the relationship between engagement with the creative arts and health outcomes, specifically the health effects of music engagement, visual arts therapy, movement-based creative expression, and expressive writing?

Although there is evidence that art-based interventions are effective in reducing adverse physiological and psychological outcomes, the extent to which these interventions enhance health status is largely

Connection Between Art, Healing, and Health

Chronic diseases are a nationwide burden, with cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of death during the past century and the incidence of diabetes continuing to increase, now affecting more than 20 million Americans. These diseases are associated with psychosocial difficulties such as depression and chronic stress, contributing to negative cardiovascular outcomes. Engagement with creative activities has the potential to contribute toward reducing stress and depression and can serve as a vehicle for alleviating the burden of chronic disease.

Over the past decade, psychologists have cautiously begun looking at how the arts might be used in a variety of ways to heal emotional injuries, increase understanding of oneself and others, develop a capacity for self-reflection, reduce symptoms, and alter behaviors and thinking patterns. Given the ubiquity of creative expression, as well as the relative ease of engagement, the extent to which psychological and physiological effects are sustainably health enhancing is an important area for



public health investigation.

Four primary therapies are often noted: music engagement, visual arts therapy, movement-based creative expression, and expressive writing. In these forms of expression, arts modalities and creative processes are used as interventions to foster health. Let us take a closer look at how others have found benefit in tying the intricacies of artistic meaning to the complexities of health and wellness.



MUSIC ENGAGEMENT

The idea that creative expression can make a powerful contribution to the healing process has been embraced in many different cultures. Throughout recorded history, people have used pictures, stories, dances, and chants as healing rituals



Music is the most ac-

cessible and most researched medium of art and healing, and there has been a principal emphasis on the soothing capacity of music and its ability to offset overly technological approaches to care. In particular, music therapy has been shown to decrease anxiety. The pleasure shared by participants in the healing process through a music therapy program can help to restore emotional balance as well. There is also evidence of the effectiveness of auditory stimulation, together with a strong suggestion that such stimulation abolishes pain, as a strategy for achieving control over pain.

In addition, it has been shown that music can calm neural

activity in the brain, which may lead to reductions in anxiety, and that it may help to restore effective functioning in the immune system partly via the actions of the amygdala and hypothalamus. As the activity levels of neu-

rons in the central nucleus of the amygdala decrease in response to calming effects of music, there may be corresponding reductions in the signals being sent to other parts of the brain.

A widely researched phenomenon is the use of music in the control of chronic cancer pain. Five benefits of using music therapy with cancer patients have been reported in the literature: increases in hospital patients' sense of control, promotion of wellness

and the healthy aspects of patients' lives, reductions in pain and increases in immunity, decreases in anxiety, and reductions in psychological and physical symptoms. In several clinical studies examining the effects of music and music therapy on healing

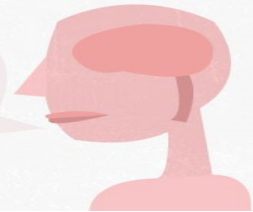


and wellness, music has been found to be a form of relaxation and anxiety reduction.

In a study of patients admitted to a coronary care unit with acute myocardial infarction, it was found that relaxation and music therapy were effective in reducing stress. After listening to relaxing music for 20 minutes, participants exhibited significant reductions in heart rate, respiratory rate, myocardial oxygen demand, and, in particular, anxiety, both immediately after and 1 hour after the intervention.

Visual Art Therapy

Studies Reveal that **ART** is Good for the Mind & Body



Art helps people express experiences that are too difficult to put into words, such as a diagnosis of cancer. Some people with cancer explore the meanings of past, present, and future during art therapy, thereby integrating cancer into their life story and giving it meaning. Case studies are a typical methodology focusing on the use of the arts in meaning making.

Art can be a refuge from the intense emotions associated with illness. There are no limits to the imagination in finding creative ways of expressing grief. In particular, molding clay can be a

powerful way to help people express these feelings through tactile involvement at a somatic level, as well as to facilitate verbal communication and cathartic release and reveal unconscious materials and symbols that cannot be expressed through words.



Arts and Healthcare
We heal your soul!

Women taking part in a qualitative study focusing on cancer described ongoing cancer-related difficulties such as fear for the future, pain, sleeplessness, role loss, activity restriction, reduced self-confidence, and altered social relationships. Engaging in different types of visual art (textiles, card making, collage, pottery, watercolor, acrylics) helped these women in 4 major ways. First, it helped them focus on positive life experiences, relieving their ongoing pre-

occupation with cancer. Second, it enhanced their self-worth and identity by providing them with opportunities to demonstrate continuity, challenge, and achievement. Third, it enabled them to maintain a social identity that resisted being defined by cancer. Finally, it allowed them to express their feelings in a symbolic manner, especially during chemotherapy.

There is evidence that use of art and music reduces hospital stays, with studies showing earlier discharges among patients taking part in visual and performing arts interventions than among those not doing so. In 1 study, surgery or critical care patients who participated in guided imagery or had a picture of a landscape on their wall had a decreased need of narcotic pain medication relative to their counterparts and left the hospital earlier. Evaluations of art projects can link the benefits of creative expression to healing and greater wellness.

In studies focused on women with cancer found that those who engaged in art making demonstrated statistically significant decreases in symptoms of physical and emotional distress during treatment. In addition to the introduction of self-care through guided imagery, the art-making therapy involved the women drawing complete pictures of themselves and engaging in yoga and meditation. The relaxation and symptom reduction produced by creative expression opened pathways to emotional healing.

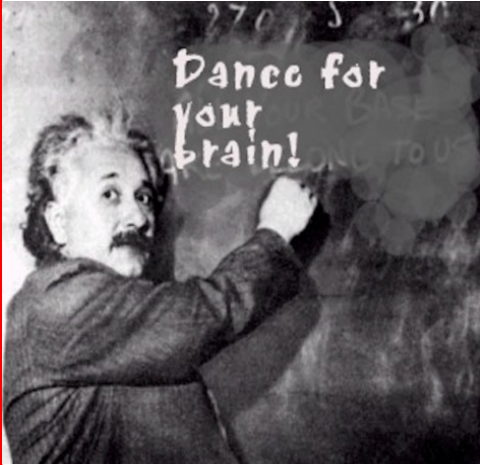
Medical professionals are beginning to recognize the role that creative arts play in the healing process; increasingly, arts in medicine programs are emerging throughout the United States and worldwide.



Movement-Based Creative Expression



A growing interest in dance and movement has accompanied recognition of the mind and body benefits of motor activity. Movement-



based creative expression focuses on nonverbal, primarily physical, forms of expression as psychotherapeutic or healing tools. Through the movement of mind and body in a creative way, stress and anxiety can be relieved, and other health benefits can be achieved as well.

Including creative movement as a mode of expression demonstrated expanding consciousness at midlife, specifically with meaningful relationships with others, self, and spirit and with challenges associated with loss, illness, and threats to relationships.

A research study at 2 cancer centers in Connecticut to determine the effects of a dance and movement program on quality of life, shoulder function, and body image among breast cancer survivors treated within the preceding 5 years. Thirty-five women completed this randomized controlled trial, which included a 12-week intervention focusing on healing through movement and dance. Results showed significant quality of life improvements in the intervention group. Shoulder range of motion increased, as did body image, at 13 weeks. By addressing posttreatment patients' physical and emotional needs, this program substantially enhanced their quality of life.

A unique study involving the use of theater investigated the benefits of a short-term intervention for adults aged 60 to 86 years that targeted cognitive functioning and quality of life issues important for independent living. After 4 weeks of instruction, those given theater training exhibited significantly greater gains than members of the no-treatment control group on both cognitive and psychological well-being measures, specifically word and listening recall, problem solving, self-esteem, and psychological well-being.

In a different type of movement expression, tai chi, a semi-meditative exercise derived from martial arts, has been gaining popularity as an intervention for reducing falls in older adults and improving health status. A study conducted among older adults who were becoming frail, attempted to determine whether intense tai chi exercise could improve perceived health status and self-rated health more than wellness education. The participants were 269 women aged 70 years or older who were recruited from 20 congregate independent senior living facilities.

In this 48-week randomized controlled trial, participants were randomly assigned to receive either tai chi or wellness education. Participants were interviewed regarding their perceived health status and self-rated health before randomization and at 1 year. Perceived health status was measured with the Sickness Impact Profile. Relative to the wellness education group, the tai chi group exhibited significant improvements in physical functioning and ambulation and borderline significant improvements in the Sickness Impact Profile body care and movement category.



EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Physical Benefits of Journaling



- Decreased physician visits
- Decreased absenteeism at work
- Improved general health
- Improved perceived health
- Immune functioning related to emotional expression



Studies have shown that, relative to control group participants, individuals who have written about their own traumatic experiences exhibit statistically significant improve-

upsetting experiences produces long-term improvements in mood and health.

In one exercise psychologist, J.W. Pennebaker had students write about their deepest thoughts and feelings on an im-

portant emotion-

al issue, with the only rule being that “once you begin writing, continue to do so until your [15- to 30-minute] time is up.” Dozens of replications of these types of studies have demonstrated that emotional writing can influence frequency of physician visits, immune function, stress hormones, blood pressure, and a number of social, academic, and cognitive variables. These effects have been shown to hold across cultures, age groups, and diverse samples.

Expressive writing can improve control over pain, depressed mood, and pain severity. For example, in a pair of randomized controlled trials patients were assigned to write about either emotional or non-emotional topics. Results showed greater improvements in control over pain and depressed mood, and marginally greater improvements in pain severity, in the anger-expression group than in the control group.

Poetry has long played a role in the art of healing. Several authors have described the use of poetry to help people find their

voice and gain access to the wisdom they already have but cannot experience because they cannot find the words in ordinary language.

Finding one's voice via poetic means can be a healing process because it opens up the opportunity for self-expression not otherwise felt through everyday words.

Expressive writing through journaling is another way to access the unconscious self. Journal writing has been linked to creativity, spiritual awareness, and expansion of the self by working through feelings, improving relationships, and learning new things about themselves.

MENTALHEALTH
MENTALILLNESS

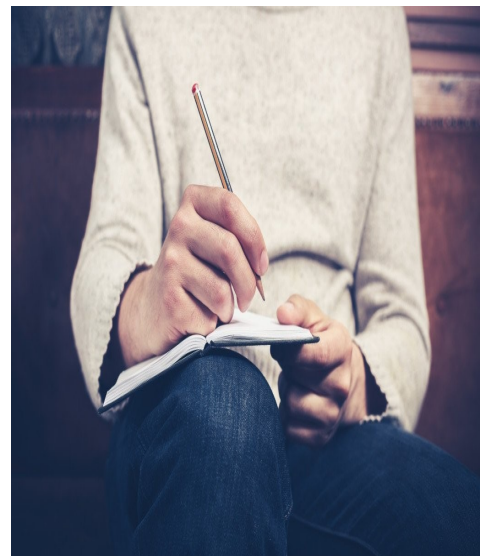


EXPRESSIVE THERAPY: WRITING IT OUT

BY SM CADMAN

ments in various measures of physical health, reductions in visits to physicians, and better immune system functioning. Writing increases health and wellness in varied ways.

Although the expressive writing paradigm has generally produced positive results, no single theory or theoretical perspective adequately explains how or why. This is likely because “expressive writing occurs on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, social and biological—making a single explanatory theory unlikely.” However, there is little doubt that writing has positive consequences, and self-report studies suggest that writing about



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Information brought to you by:
CDC, WHO, The Connection Between
Art, Healing, and Public Health:
A Review of Current Literature
Heather L. Stuckey, DEd and Jeremy
Nobel, MD, MPH

Take Care of Your Health



The majority of art, healing, and health research was conducted within hospital rather than community settings. Given our nation's ideal of individuality, the social support that can be derived from one's community is an important but much ignored area of research. Ideally, community leaders will partner with researchers to create a health care agenda that can have an impact on not only those who

are ill in hospitals but those in the community who want to experience greater wellness.

Use of the arts in healing does not contradict the medical view in bringing emotional, somatic, artistic, and spiritual dimensions to learning. Rather, it complements the biomedical view by focusing on not only sickness and symptoms themselves but the holistic nature of the person. When people are invited to work with creative and artistic processes that affect more than their identity with illness, they are more able to “create congruence between

their affective states and their conceptual sense making.” Through creativity and imagination, we find our identity and our reservoir of healing. The more we understand the relationship between creative expression and healing, the more we will discover the healing power of the arts.

