

How Art Can Make Your Body Healthier

“Art is a collaboration between God and the artist, and the less the artist does the better.” –André Gide

Most people believe artistic talent is either something you have in spades or not at all, that you're either a Picasso with paints or someone stuck on stick figures and stencils, a Beethoven or a better-not-quit-your-day-job wannabe bass player.

But if you've ever wanted to express yourself creatively, why not go for it? There's nothing to lose. In fact, it turns out there's quite a bit to gain if you want a healthier body and a sharper brain! (That sentence was a poem, and therefore totally counts as art.)

An article from states that, “Many scientists agree that the arts can help reduce stress and anxiety, improve well-being and enhance the way we fight infection.” Music, for example, has been shown to activate the same areas of the brain as chocolate.

When we were infants, music, in the form of lullabies and our parents' cooing, was a tremendous comfort to us, chocolate for our ears, if you will. In Alzheimer's patients, lyrics and melodies are often the last to go when all other memories have faded; when a certain song is sung or hummed, associated images reemerge and the past is recaptured, if only for a moment.

Recent studies have found evidence that singing releases substances that serve as the brain's own natural pain-killers. Additionally, levels of molecules important for fighting infection can rise when we listen to music.

If you're like me, music accompanies many of life's daily activities. For instance, when I work out, I listen to upbeat praise and worship music, Christian rap or classic rock. When I sit down to work on my latest book project or article, I listen mostly to ambient or electronic music. And when I'm reading and relaxing, I prefer the likes of Gershwin, Tchaikovsky and Debussy.

From these three examples alone, you can see that music can be as motivating as it is emotive, and as stimulating as it is soothing. But music therapy is also sometimes used clinically, requiring a certified therapist to interact with the patient. To measure the effects of such therapy, one study showed how levels of an important brain chemical that relays signals between cells increased after four weeks of music therapy. The levels decreased after the therapy ended.

And a recent report from Finnish scientists showed that listening to music helps stroke patients recover both their memory and their focused attention. The researchers also found that music can reduce post-stroke depression and confusion. Other studies suggest that stroke patients may improve faster if they sing, rather than speak, as part of their rehabilitation.

Scientists are also studying how art therapy can help to ease pain and stress and improve quality of life.

When it comes to art, several small studies, some of which were supported by *News in Health*, have suggested that art therapy can help improve health status, quality of life and coping behaviors. It can improve depression and fatigue in cancer patients on chemotherapy, and help prevent burnout in caregivers. It's also been used to help prepare children for painful medical procedures, as well as to improve the speech of children with cerebral palsy.

According to Megan Robb, a certified art therapist at NIH's

Clinical Center, "When traumatic memories are stored in the brain, they're not stored as words but as images. Art therapy is uniquely suited to access these memories." She explained that once you draw or paint these images, you can then progress to forming words to describe them. This transports the trauma out of isolation and into a positive exchange with the therapist. This process, Robb said, gives you "an active involvement in your own healing."

Next comes writing (my favorite!). Expressive writing, which is defined as writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events, has been shown to have a number of health benefits, from improving symptoms of depression to helping fight infection. Dr. James W. Pennebaker of the University of Texas at Austin has designed several studies to show the links between writing and health.

"Writing about emotional upheavals in our lives can improve physical and mental health," Pennebaker said. "Although the scientific research surrounding the value of expressive writing is still in the early phases, there are some approaches to writing that have been found to be helpful."

In a series of exercises, healthy student volunteers who wrote about traumatic experiences had more positive moods, fewer illnesses and better measures of immune-system function than those who wrote about superficial experiences. Even six weeks later, the students who'd written about what upset them reported more positive moods and fewer illnesses than those who'd written about everyday experiences.

In another study of students vulnerable to depression, those who did expressive writing exercises showed significantly lower depression symptoms, even after six months, than those who had written about everyday matters.

And if none of the above art forms are your cup of tea, perhaps dancing will suit your fancy! Arts that involve

movement, such as dance, can also reap health benefits. We already know that physical activity can help us reduce stress, prevent diseases, boost energy, sleep better and fight anxiety, so pull out your old tap shoes, tutu or Zumba outfit and dance like no one's watching!

Art doesn't have to be pretty. It has to be meaningful."
—Duane Hanson

And now for some of the incredible ways that penning a poem, scribbling a short story, painting a portrait or playing the piano can benefit your brain and mental health:

Art Kick-Starts Your Imagination

If you consider yourself an artistic person, you can enhance creative skills you already possess. If you think of yourself as more analytical, creating art will stimulate your creativity and imagination.

Art Makes You More Observant

Shakespeare wrote, "The earth has music for those who listen."

Creating art helps you learn to "listen" by concentrating on detail and paying more attention to your environment.

Art Enhances Problem-Solving Skills

Art encourages us to think outside the box and lets us devise our own unique solutions.

Art Boosts Self-Esteem

Hanging your latest work of art on the wall can instill you with the same feeling you had when your mom posted your art project or doodle on the fridge.

Art Reduces Stress

The arts comprise rewarding hobbies that can lower stress

levels and lead to an overall improvement in wellbeing.

Art Enhances Cognitive Abilities and Memory

The first half of this article speaks to this amazing gift of participating in artistic activities.

American painter and teacher Robert Henri said that “The object isn’t to make art, it’s to be in that wonderful state which makes art inevitable.” I hope you decide to embrace and pursue “that wonderful state,” whatever it looks like for you, be it a composition notebook and a fountain pen or an old piccolo you haven’t picked up in decades, and let the thrilling creation of art bring peace, renewal and joy to your entire being. And above all, it’s my prayer that as you create and appreciate art, you will be inspired to give glory to the Artist who created us all.

“But now, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; and we all are the work of Your hand” (Is. 64:8).

Stay fit; stay faithful.

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