



The Psychology of Creativity:

How the Arts Benefit
Mental Health



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Mental health and art intersect in the professional world. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is **art therapy**, which brings together creativity and psychotherapy in a client-therapist context.

I suspect that mental health and art also relate in a more basic way. I don't say this to trivialize art therapy's positive effect on mental health, as a **plethora of evidence** suggests that it helps those with disorders like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression.

My point, rather, is that one of the practical consequences of being active in the art world is that it promotes mental health, whether a person is aware of that fact or not. In this article, I'll be considering three benefits that artistic activity has for mental health: concentration, self-expression, and socialization.

I. Concentration

Being creative often takes more willpower than being distracted. Although nobody can be productive all the time, it's important for a person to be aware of what they spend time thinking about. Research on obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is here useful, both for those who have the disorder and those who don't.

Psychiatrist Jeffrey M. Schwartz has a four-step method for helping those with OCD. One of the steps is Refocus, where the patient spends fifteen minutes paying attention to something helpful

instead of harmful. What happens when an OCD sufferer does this is that brain activity increases in the cortex and caudate while decreasing in the overactive orbital frontal cortex.¹

The research on this topic quickly becomes technical, but the point here is simple: what we pay attention to affects our brains.

Art is an invitation to concentrate on beautiful things. For myself, I enjoy walking outside and taking pictures, as this demands a special kind of focus. When I have my camera with me, I no longer experience the evanescent thoughts and scenes that accompany mere walking. Instead, I start to pay attention as ordinary objects like doors, sunflowers, and railways turn into objects of high aesthetic value.

2. Self-Expression

What we do with our emotions affects our mental health.

Suppressing one's emotions is among the most harmful options, as it makes a person vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

It's often said that men are socialized into hiding their emotions. Personally, I think this idea is simplistic. Shakespeare chose Hamlet as his melancholic protagonist; Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is informed by emotion rather than logic; William Blake's "The Clod

1 Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: ReganBooks, 2003), 14, 84, 355–356.



and the Pebble” is gentle and imaginative.

Why do we say things like this? Perhaps it’s convenient to conflate hiding our emotions with not wanting to talk about them.

Having conversations about our emotions is important, but there are other ways to express them. Writing in a journal can help a person process difficult thoughts and feelings privately. The metaphors of poetry and the ethereal sounds of music allow us to express our emotions in such a way that direct communication often doesn’t do justice to.

Art isn’t interesting when it’s separated from emotion. Artistic activities like writing and music are opportunities to express our emotions in a symbolic and creative way. I’m not saying these are replacements for having direct conversations with others, but it’s a step in the right direction for those who might be reluctant to do so. Although statistics are lacking on the topic, it’s a stereotype that many artists are introverted, shy, and sensitive. If there’s any truth to this, then the arts offer something

incredibly valuable to people with those personality traits.

3. Socialization

According to “the social brain” concept, particular brain regions affect social functions like empathy, helping others, and cooperation. Although there’s no shortage of debate over how this exactly works, the crucial point is that socializing is fundamental to a properly functioning brain.

Socializing is just as relevant to art as it is to mental health. To use a couple of examples from Howard S. Becker, painters require others to manufacture and distribute their paints and canvases. Similarly, poets need editors and publishers to finalize and distribute their work.² Socializing is so fundamental to art that we fail to appreciate it.

Volunteering is another example of how socializing takes place in the art world. As

² Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3, 5.

a [recent publication](#) from Statistics Canada notes, the arts and culture sector is one of the most attractive sectors for volunteers. In 2018, formal volunteers dedicated 104 hours to arts and culture, ranking it fourth out of fourteen organization types.

In my own life, volunteering has made me more empathetic. Once I started writing reviews for a music website, I began to ask myself how the artists would feel if they were to read my thoughts. This didn’t turn my prose into five-star reviews (which I rarely gave), but it helped me learn how to balance honesty and sensitivity. On one occasion I wrote a two-star review that a band member commented on. Although my review was mostly critical, I wrote it in a fun way that made room for compliments. By doing this, I was able to offer constructive feedback instead of cheap Internet drama.

Volunteering has also made me more cooperative. I used to be on the editorial board of a literary magazine, and I remember during one of our meetings voting for a piece that another member



had voted against. As good as it made me feel to be a dissident voice, I put aside my difference of opinion when the piece I voted for wasn't accepted. This experience made me realize that when I share a primary goal with others, I care less about my own preferences. I like having unpopular opinions as much as the next individualist, but when I'm working with others, I'm reminded that people are more important than ideas.

When we collaborate with others for artistic purposes, we're saying "yes" both to the social aspect of art and to the social aspect that our brains are wired for.

I began this article by discussing art therapy. Although the discipline is an important example of how mental health and art intersect, it is by no means the only example. Not every artist will be the client of an art therapist, yet every artist has a state of mental health to maintain. Art, regardless of its context, has the potential to benefit mental health.

Art allows us to concentrate on what's beautiful, no matter how small the details may be. It lets us express our deepest emotions through writing and music. Art also encourages us to socialize through volunteering, which can positively affect our emotions.

As a creative, I like having my head in the clouds. But artistic activity also has practical benefits, three of which have been discussed in this article.



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