

The arts play an important role in improving well-being, according to a WHO report



By Sally Robertson, B.Sc.

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A new report from the WHO Regional Office for Europe has concluded that engaging in art-based activities can significantly benefit health, both mentally and physically.



Image Credit: By Vladyslav Starozhylov / Shutterstock.com

The conclusion is based on the most comprehensive review of evidence to date, which references more than 900 publications worldwide, including 200 reviews covering more than 3000 studies.

The WHO Regional Director for Europe, Piroska Östlin, says engaging in activities such as dancing, singing, visiting museums, and attending concerts provides an added dimension to how people can improve their physical and mental health.

“*The examples cited in this ground-breaking WHO report show ways in which the arts can tackle ‘wicked’ or complex health challenges such as diabetes, obesity, and mental ill-health. They consider health and well-being in a broader societal and community context, and offer solutions that common medical practice has so far been unable to address effectively,*”

Piroska Östlin, WHO Regional Director for Europe

The review, which is entitled The Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report, was presented yesterday at an event in Helsinki, Finland, where health experts, practitioners, policymakers, and service users all gathered to discuss the role that arts interventions can play in healthcare. It identified a major role for art activities in preventing ill-health, promoting good health and in managing and treating illness across the lifespan.

The research that was reviewed included case studies, uncontrolled pilot studies, small-scale cross-sectional surveys, community-wide ethnographies, nationally representative longitudinal cohort studies, and randomized controlled trials.

Research and development over the past two decades

“Over the past two decades, there has been a major increase in research into the effects of the arts on health and well-being, alongside developments in practice and policy activities in different countries across the WHO European Region and further afield,” say co-authors of the report Daisy Fancourt and Saorise Finn from University College London. “This report synthesizes the global evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being, with a specific focus on the WHO European Region.”

The report looks at the health benefits of participating (either passively or actively) in five main types of arts activities, which included the following:

- Performing arts activities such as singing, dancing, and film
- Visual arts activities such as photography, painting, and crafts

- Literature activities such as reading and writing
- Culture activities such as attending galleries and museums
- Online art activities such as animation and the digital arts

Health benefits were observed across all stages of life

The review found that from birth through to the end of life, participation in the arts is associated with health benefits. Young children who are read to by their parents at bedtime, for example, sleep for longer during the night and have improved concentration at school.

Among adolescents living in urban areas, receiving drama-based education can promote well-being and responsible decision-making, as well as reducing exposure to violence. Among older individuals with dementia, musical activities can support cognition, particularly singing, which has been shown to improve memory, attention, and executive function.

The benefits in healthcare

In healthcare, participation in the arts can support or improve treatment regimens. Producing pieces of art or listening to music, for example, has been shown to minimize the side effects of cancer treatment such as nausea, drowsiness, and lack of appetite.

Engaging in art activities within emergency settings has been shown to reduce pain levels, anxiety levels, and blood pressure, particularly among children and dancing has been shown to improve motor skills in individuals with Parkinson's disease.

The report also emphasizes that as well as art activities benefiting health, they can also be more cost-effective to implement than standard biomedical interventions. The activities can be combined to promote various different physical and mental health factors, simultaneously and the risk of any negative outcome is low.

Since art activities can be adjusted to suit people from different cultures, they can also provide a way to include minority or hard-to-reach groups of people. A number of countries are now seeking to employ social prescribing programs

so that doctors can refer patients for art interventions.

Considerations for policymakers

The report also highlights factors that should be taken into consideration by policymakers, including the following:

- Ensuring that arts-for-health programs are accessible and available within communities
- Promoting the potential health benefits to the public
- Supporting art and culture organizations in including health and well-being as part of their work
- Including arts-for-health in the training of healthcare workers
- Introducing or improving referral to arts activities among health or social care centers.
- Investing in more research into arts-for-health interventions and their implementation

Fancourt and Finn conclude: “The beneficial impact of the arts could be furthered through acknowledging and acting on the growing evidence base; promoting arts engagement at the individual, local and national levels; and supporting cross-sectoral collaboration.”

Source:

Can you dance your way to better health and well-being? For the first time, WHO studies the link between arts and health. World Health Organisation. Available from: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2019/can-you-dance-your-way-to-better-health-and-well-being-for-the-first-time,-who-studies-the-link-between-arts-and-health>



Written by

Sally Robertson

Sally has a Bachelor's Degree in Biomedical Sciences (B.Sc.). She is a specialist in reviewing and summarising the latest findings across all areas of medicine covered in major, high-impact, world-leading international medical journals, international press conferences and bulletins from governmental agencies and regulatory bodies.

At News-Medical, Sally generates daily news features, life science articles and interview coverage.