

*I'm Grateful for
the Opportunity*

The Healing Power of Art

Art, creativity and imagination are essential to human mental well-being.

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A HARMONIOUS, WELL-LIVED life is marked by a sense of purpose and meaning. We are encouraged to strive for balance — work-life balance and mind-body balance. However, our world today has become less about balance and more about “inflow.” We spend more time than ever at our computers or on our phones. We are bombarded with messages from social media, streaming devices, gaming systems, advertisements, television and all sorts of other technology from which we relentlessly (and sometimes unwittingly) receive information. But how often do we provide the outflow? How often do we create?

It has been my observation that art, imagination and creativity can have a direct, positive impact on our mental well-being. Art offers all human beings the opportunity to live in the moment in a calming, tranquil and serene flow of attention. These are major reasons why art can be considered a “necessary” part of life on planet earth.

First, let's consider the meaning of each of these terms. When I talk about art, I mean the creation of beautiful things. Imagination is the ability to visualize or form images and ideas in the mind — particularly of things never seen or experienced directly. Creativity is the ability to use that imagination to develop new and original ideas or things, especially in an artistic context. These aspects of creation provide a unique opportunity for outflow, which contributes to a more balanced and harmonious life.

A Vital Component of Academics

Art in the modern curriculum began in the 1820s and was subsequently refined when educational philosopher John Dewey entered the scene. It was understood by educators of the day that art was a vital component of academic learning. It was also understood that art could have the potential to be significant in child development and personal expression. Fast forward to 2018 and only 29 out of 50 states consider art to be an important part of academic subjects — a great misfortune for our children and for society as a whole.

A 2017 evaluation of an arts charity organization revealed that participants reported a 71 percent decrease in feelings of anxiety and a 73 percent decrease in depression. Further, 76 percent of the art participants reported that their well-being increased and 69 percent reported that they felt more socially included. It is from this and similar findings that we know art, creativity and imagination can be critical components of mental health.

Independent Thinking

Einstein is often credited with saying, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Art encourages independent thinking, and independent thinking is a pro-survival trait. When considering the disproportionate amount of inflow versus outflow in today’s world, it follows that there are few invitations for independent thought in modern society. Art truly offers this outlet.

With so many of us working from behind a keyboard and computer screen, it has become harder to filter through the vast oceans of information that flood our mental experience every single day. It’s difficult to know what’s factual and what’s not, and it has become more important than ever to develop our own sense of discernment and independent thinking. This isn’t just something important to artists; I believe this is important for our survival as social creatures. The dangers of groupthink have always involved faulty and uninformed thinking, and this is something we should consciously avoid in our technology-integrated world.

Live in the Moment

Creating art gives individuals an opportunity to take solace in their own minds. It offers the chance to process and be present in the moment. This calming, tranquil and serene focus of attention shifts our thoughts away from the problems of life. This change of focus can lead a person out of the negativity they are experiencing. The outside world disappears; problems are left just outside the door, waiting for the clearer mind that will inevitably

emerge after the imagination has been set free. In fact, even former President Franklin D. Roosevelt is credited with the saying, "Happiness lies in the joy of achievement, and the thrill of creative effort."

I remember taking my children to Home Depot and Michaels craft store when they were small. I have seen in my own personal experience how these excursions into art and creativity helped them develop new coping skills alongside imaginative problem-solving skills. But art isn't just for children. It is for adults, too. That's the beauty of art — there's no age limit.

Get Inspired

Creating art is a healing process. Unfortunately, the need for art does not always strike at the most convenient times. In fact, the need for art may come when you are feeling the least inspired.

But it is at these times when it is critical to be intentional about making space for it. From my perspective, art, creativity and imagination are essential to human mental well-being. If you can't create a lot, create a little. And if you don't feel like creating, consider visiting an art museum to find inspiration. It's guaranteed to uplift you.

Creativity is Key