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## Art and the Pursuit of Happiness: How Artists Use Art to Promote Their Emotional Well-being

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Running head: HOW ARTISTS USE ART TO PROMOTE EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Art and the Pursuit of Happiness: How Artists Use Art to Promote Their Emotional Well-being

University Honors Thesis Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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## University of Nebraska at Omaha Honors Thesis Abstract

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## Abstract

Artists have used art's positive mental and physical health effects for as long as art has been around. Art is known to have many therapeutic and mood benefiting effects, from reduced anxiety and stress levels, to increased confidence and a sense of purpose. Many different clinical studies have found art to be beneficial to people who have suffered from PTSD, bipolar disorder, strokes, and cancer pain. Despite the clearly beneficial effects of creativity associated with art, artists suffer from disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia at a much higher rate than the general population. This study sought to use artists' perspectives to understand more about how and why artists use their art making to boost their emotional well-being. The broader aim of this research is to apply its findings to both other artists and to the general population. We interviewed five subjects who regularly make and observe art and asked them about how, if at all, they use the creation of art to promote their well-being. A common theme of the survey results was that all of the artists started very young and use the creative process of generating art similar to the use of meditation. Completing a final product also gave them a boosted sense of purpose; every artist suggested that others should participate in art making. Future studies should focus on applying this knowledge further with studies that include children and the general population.

Art and the Pursuit of Happiness: How Artists Use Art to Promote  
Their Emotional Well-being

### **Background**

The use of art for its therapeutic and mood benefiting effects has been around for nearly as long as art itself. It did not become a formal practice until the 1940's, however, when a British artist Adrian Hill coined the term "art therapy" in 1945 in his book *Art Versus Illness* (Hill, 1945). He writes, "*I became... a diligent and leisurely composer of precise pencil productions, each of which, in the terms of my restricted medium, sought to express my personal reactions to the unreality of my existence*" (Hill, 1945, p.14). Hill used his art as a medium to pass time and explore the discontent he held for certain aspects of his life. Despite his work to develop this field, art was not recognized as a therapeutic strategy by the regulated mental health profession until almost 50 years later, in 1991. Thus, understanding the effects of art therapy is subsequently one of the youngest scientific fields of study (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). In the last 30 years, the mood aiding benefits of art and creativity have been explored but there are still many gaps in the available literature.

There has been a long history between the creation of art and an inclination of mental or behavioral disorders. Generational artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, and Salvador Dali all suffered from various mental or substance-abuse disorders (Deveney, 2020). However, this is not just restricted to artists recognized as being great. Great artists often suffer from extraordinary situations which seems to contribute to their development into extraordinary people. This applies to other artists as well, however. A Cambridge University study found that those who explored higher education in an art field were statistically twice

likely to develop schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and unipolar depression in adulthood when compared to the general population (MacCabe et al., 2018). Despite these findings, it is still unknown whether creative individuals are predisposed to mental-health disorders or those with mental health disorders are more likely to turn to the arts for help. One study found a link between a gene associated with psychotic risk and an altered prefrontal cortex activation was also associated with creativity among high intellectual achievers (Szablocs, 2009). That study establishes that there is at least some genetic component to this problem, but the full story is yet to be discovered.

The current study focuses on how artists use their art creation to promote their well-being in their day to day lives. Many experiments have attempted to understand how making art can aid people through various diseases and other problems, but not many studies incorporated those who make art for a living in their research. One study found that cortisol levels dropped for 75% of participants after a forty-five-minute art session and indicated higher levels of relaxation and freedom (Kamal, Ray & Muniz, 2016). Interestingly, they also found no differences between those who had prior art experiences and those who had none. This hints that results can be seen immediately and are not affected by one's familiarity or talent with art.

Similarly, another study found that creating art had many beneficial effects, including increased happiness and confidence, reduced anxiety, stress relief, and a greater sense of accomplishment (Riley, Corkhill & Morris, 2013). They also found that it can improve cognitive abilities such as memory function, concentration, and the ability to think through problems. Creating a product through arts gives participants a sense of fulfillment and can help them in nearly all aspects of their lives. A valid criticism of such studies is that, since some individuals

may find the creative process underlying the generation of art stressful, there may also be self-selection among those who are able to pursue art as therapy.

Many studies have attempted to discover how to use art as a way to counteract symptoms following an injury or disease diagnosis. Art interventions have been tested for people suffering from dementia, post stroke psychological disorders, adult anxiety, cancer pain, depression, and many other disorders (Deshmukh, Holmes & Cardno, 2018; Eum & Yim, 2015; Abbing et al., 2018; Shella, 2018; Blomdahl et al., 2016). These studies have shown mixed results, with some reporting no differences after the intervention and others showing positive changes similar to other modes of intervention. Multiple studies have found that art interventions reduced stress levels and negative emotions in cancer patients, trauma patients, and those with chronic illnesses (Ross et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2004; Nainis et al., 2006; Samoray; 2006). Overall, most studies agree that there is at least some level of general health benefit of creating and observing art on a regular basis. In a review of the efficacy of artistic creativity for health, Stuckey and Nobel (2010) reiterated this and concluded that there were clear indications that engaging in artistic events had significant positive effects on one's health. Their study reviewed multiple forms of art and expression, including music engagement, visual arts, movement based created expression, and expressive writing.

Unfortunately, almost all the current research explores how art helps patients in times of stress or pain and do not consider those who have already turned to the creation of arts. This study interviews artists to assess how they use their art and the creative process to modulate their moods and stress. It is based on the premise that artists can provide an insight into the health benefits of art. Surprisingly, this is a new perspective on this young field of research that

could be applied to future studies. The goal of this study is to learn why and how artists use their art to promote their wellness. Hopefully, these insights can be applied to understanding how the creative process of generating art can aid the rest of the population.

## **Methodology**

### Data Collection and Interview

Data was collected for this study from March 2020 to April 2020. Prior to the interviews, a set of question prompts was developed in order to direct the conversations (Appendix I). These questions were designed to understand the individual's history and currently relationship with art, why and how they engage with art, and what role art plays in their emotional well-being. The objective of the interview was to identify common values or themes in how art and the creation of art affected each artists life. A qualitative examination of common and reoccurring themes was chosen as the methodological focus of this study. Qualitative research is typically carried out through interviews or observation, this study elected to gather data through the former (Jamshed, 2014).

Previous interview-based studies typically employed anywhere from eight to twenty interviewees (McCracken, 1993). A typical undergraduate study of this kind has four to five subjects and included three to fifteen questions. Our study ended with a final subject count of five and had an 11-question survey. Each interview lasted between 10-to-25 minutes and had an average time of 14 minutes. Each interview was recorded via Voice Memos on an iPhone 8. Recordings were then analyzed separately to identify similarities and differences in their responses.



### Participant Inclusion Criteria

Participation criterion included individuals that were at least 19 years of age, currently live in the United States, and spent time creating or observing art on a weekly basis. A wide array of artists was chosen, from professional full-time artists, student artists, and those who consistently use art as a hobby, to obtain a somewhat broad range of how art is used by different factions of artists. This allowed us to gain insights full time artists as well as casual artists while also applying the artist community's knowledge to non-artists.

**Subjects-** The final subject count was N= 5 (3 males and 2 females). Each participant was given a subject number for anonymity. Subject 1 (S1) is a current senior art student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), studying art design. Subject 2 (S2) creates graphic art often in their free time and designs graphic tee-shirts and cover art for local artists. Subject 3 (S3) is a full-time art history professor at UNO. Subject 4 (S4) is an UNO student who routinely paints in their free time. Subject 5 (S5) is a full-time artist who largely paints and uses novel techniques including metal and power tools as part of their media.

This study obtained approval as exempt protocol 265-20-EX from the UNMC/UNO Institutional Review Board. The approval letter is located in Appendix II.

## **Results**

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes and tropes. These were used to piece together how and why artists use their art to promote their emotional wellness. Multiple themes were found and will be further explored in the discussion. Firstly, all the artists started making art very young. This seemed to be very important for forming habits and routines later in life. All five of the artists also use their creation as art as a form of meditation,

even though the majority do so without apparent intent. Only one artist explicitly mentioned meditation, but all the artists expressed art providing aspects of a meditative process. Three of the artists mentioned making art typically during the night or early morning, while the other two make it at all times of the day. Similarly, artists receive fulfillment and health benefits through their creation of a self-made product while also allowing them to compete with themselves and other artists. Four out of the five artists spoke about how their final product gave them satisfaction and fulfillment. Finally, when asked whether they would suggest that other people should try creating art to promote their emotional wellbeing, all the artists said yes, but surprisingly gave differing reasons.

### Common Themes

#### Artists Start Young

All five of the artists started making art before the age twelve. Subject 1 (S1) stated that she started very young, 5-6, around the first grade, by doodling and recreating art they saw around them. This sentiment was repeated, almost verbatim, by S2. The other three subjects said they started around the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, about age 11-12. While not as young as the first two subjects, this is still a young and impressionable age. Artists clearly get into art at an early age and this helps them develop it into a lifelong habit. When asked about when they tend to make art, subject 5 said, "In the morning, right when I get up. I like to do it every day, but in the morning.... I have a lot of energy and that's when I can set aside some time and really be productive" (O'Donnell, personal interview, 2020). Having a stable routine helps them be productive in their work. These habits promote routines within their lives and that leads to many health benefits through a stable routine.

Similarly, every artist mentioned someone close to them that had an influence on getting them into the arts. S1 and 3 both had close relative that were professional artists; S1's mother was a fashion designer for a career and 3's aunt was a ceramicist. Parents also played a role in S2 and 5's early life. S2's parents heavily encouraged him to draw from a young age and supported them after realizing their natural art talent. Similarly, S5 recalled how his mother would always note how creative he was as a child and this encouraged him when he made art and decided to go into it professionally. All of the interviewees directly referenced how their parents influenced their art from a very early age. Subject 1 summed up her parents influence as, "... My mom was a fashion major, so she had her stuff all around the house. We always saw it and she would teach us how to draw when we were little" (Wostoupal, personal interview, 2020). This exact sentiment was echoed by the other four interviewees.

#### Artists Use Art like Meditation

Despite only one artist explicitly mentioned the meditative effects, every one of them described arts effects in an extremely similar manner as meditation and they used art for the same purpose in their lives. S1 referenced the "freeness" of art and how there is "no right answer". Freeness was also a theme brought up by S3, who stated "... So many other activities have rules... But with art there's no rules necessarily, and that's the beautiful part" (Duran, personal interview, 2020). This was reiterated by S2 who said "You don't even have to think when you do it... You don't have to research things... You can just do what works for you" (Shaffer, personal interview, 2020). S2 and his peers' answers accentuate the simplicity and care-free attitude making art can have. The only artist that likened art to meditation was S4, who uses art as a way to "escape and clear thoughts" and to relax when they are stressed.

Ironically, this interviewee was the only one who is not a full-time artist and does not sell any artwork out of all of the participants. Finally, S5 mirrored the other participants sentiments stating that when they were growing up, throughout high school, they used art as a “coping mechanism” and it “helped (them) deal with issues” that stressed them out.

Artists also use art like meditation in how they schedule around it. Three of the artists (S1, S2, and S5) specifically mentioned preferring to work on art immediately in the morning or at night before going to bed. The other artists said they do not have any specific preference, rather, they partake in art whenever they have free time, including often in the mornings or evenings. S1 mentioned, “It seems to be in the middle of the night... when I’m about to go to bed. Or when right when I wake up” (Wostoupal, personal interview, 2020). S1 and S5 both paralleled this response very similarly.

#### Creation and Competition Fosters Purpose

All five artists reported feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment after the creation of their art. One interesting perspective was from S3, who compared the art and sports worlds as such, “ You’re really competing with yourself, right?... You’re competing internally (to beat your personal best) and externally (to beat everyone else) at the same time and I think that there is something about the arts that are very similar in a way” (Duran, personal interview, 2020).

S5 stated a similar case when they stated, “I want to get better at making things that are new and kind of novel, that people haven’t necessarily seen done that way before” (O’Donnell, personal interview, 2020). In this statement, S5 covered the competition aspect, by wanting to do something no one has ever done before. They also mentioned receiving a sense of fulfillment associated with creating art. It “ties together” the other aspects of their life and gives

everything more “meaning and color”. S1 enjoyed how, in art, you can take other ideas and build from them and how art almost had a problem-solving aspect to it. Another example brought up, by S2, was being able to compare the final product to your inspiration. He described that moment as “always satisfying”.

#### Artists say Most People Would Benefit from Art

When asked, all five of the artists said that they would suggest that everyone try to make art on a consistent basis. Surprisingly, all of the artists gave differing reasons for this suggestion. S1 mentioned that, at the very least, everyone should do some form of doodling or adult coloring books to start. This would be a good introduction to art, and they can get more serious later if they do enjoy it. S2 gave somewhat of a more cautious endorsement, stating, “ Yes.... But I would not advise it if you are super critical of yourself. You can’t go into it expecting it to be perfect” (Shaffer, personal interview, 2020). This was echoed somewhat by S5 who said they would advise it to most people, but it should go by a person by person basis and everyone should find their own thing to destress and that it doesn’t specifically need to be art. The most resounding yes was by S3, who suggested that everyone devote sometime on a daily basis to making or observing art. Spending any time away from the hecticness of everyday life is surely going to be good for you and will allow you to have time for peace of mind. S4 stated that everyone should try art because they don’t have to share it with anyone else and they can keep it to themselves, similar to a personal journal. Each artist understood the benefits to creating art, however, they all listed alternate reasons to why they thought others should do it as well. This shows the many dimensions of art making and just how far the health and personal benefits can stretch.

## Discussion

Clearly, artists use many different tactics through art to promote their own emotional wellbeing. One tactic artist use is beginning from a young age. Starting young and constant repetition are crucial to continuing an activity into adulthood. Studies have shown that habits form at a very early age in kids. House routines, such as chore work and responsibility, can develop by the age of 9 or 10 and financial ideologies about money, saving versus spending, can be formed years earlier (Pressman et al., 2014). Having a well-developed routine have also been shown to reduce stress, help our sleep, diet, and exercise, and promote positive daily self-care habits (Arlinghaus & Johnson, 2018). Our findings mirror these past studies while expanding them to artists in the art world.

Our results found that all the subjects had tons of parental guidance and support when it came to their artistic careers. Studies have shown that parental encouragement raises a youth's confidence and mental and physical health into adulthood (Wickrama, Lorenz & Conger, 1997). This plays a huge role in a person's mental health and reveals why artists get into art in the first place. Having a supporting figure encouraging their art likely gave them extra confidence and aided their decision to continue making art later in life. They use their art to create multiple different health benefits through setting routines and parental encouragement.

Another defining theme was how artists are able to destress through the freedom accompanied by art making and use it in a meditative fashion. When people meditate, they are never searching for one objective truth or right answer, instead, they look to release themselves of stressors and increase their awareness (Sharma, 2015). Arts lack of rules that can be accompanied by other activities allow artists to worry less while creating their works. You get to

keep your brain active but relax and be free of stressors at the same time. S3 described making and looking at art as “quiet” and said it lets you get away from the world and even yourself for a short period of time; this is the exact mindset that people strive for when they meditate (Canfield, 2019).

Researchers have studied meditation extensively and found that participating during certain times of the day leads to greater results. We found that 3 of the artists we interviewed (S1, S2, and S5) almost exclusively work during the mornings or late at night. The other two have no time preferences but also mentioned working early or later in the day. This seems to agree with the current literature. Obviously, meditating occasionally is better than never, but the consensus seems to be that the best times to meditate are early in the morning or at night before you go to bed (Zeng et al., 2017). In this manner, these findings support the existing literature.

We theorize that the two subjects which did not subscribe to a similar morning/afternoon schedule was a result of higher responsibilities outside of art. Each person has different needs when it comes to time management and responsibilities, hence their daily routines are often dictated by these needs. S3 is a full-time UNO professor and S4 is a full time UNO student who also works, so each squeeze in time for art wherever they can get it. On this topic, S3 said, “As long as I’m awake, I’ll take it (art) whenever it’s there” (Duran, personal interview, 2020). Many artists may not be aware of the science and benefits behind meditation, but they are clearly benefiting from their art in similar ways and even unknowingly copy the most effective forms of these techniques.

Recent studies have found that creating a product or craft can have multiple health benefits and our findings replicate this. The artists stated that they felt a boost of confidence and pride when they completed a work of art. There are many potential health benefits to creating something, including mood elevation, anxiety relief, boosted immune system, and brain function (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Lowered anxiety and mood elevation can be attributed to the sense of purpose one receives from creating something on their own and feeling pride in the final product (Cohut, 2020). Lower anxiety and elevated brain functioning play a valuable role in increasing one's overall health.

Internal and external healthy competition also has been found to benefit people's emotional wellbeing (McLean, 2018). Even though there are no art tournaments or winners in art, you still can compete with yourself and everyone else that has made art before you. Without direct person to person competition, art competition is very likely to be healthy and not toxic. Artists receive a sense of accomplishment in other facets of life when they complete a work, particularly when they perceive it to be good. This is similar to how people report feeling after winning a competition. Art creation can allow for competition and perceived success in the lives of people who likely do not feel fully satisfied with either their work or social lives.

Finally, all the artists believed that most people should attempt to turn to art for its many benefits. Interestingly, they offered different reasons to why they should. Two of the artists did mention that art is likely not the best way for everyone and people should go by a case by case basis. Some people are extremely self-critical and creating art could exacerbate their self-image. A recent study found that 25% of people did not report any benefits or show lower stress hormone levels after two from 45-minute art therapy sessions (Kamal, Ray &



Muniz, 2016). While finding that 75% could potentially gain from producing art is amazing, this still means that around a quarter of the population could be unaffected by the potential health benefits of the arts.

### **Conclusion**

There are many important reasons to why artists turn to creating arts and they can have many benefits on health. Artists inadvertently pull from many different sectors to promote their mental and physical health. They use art to develop and stick to daily routines. Consistent routines have been shown to have many benefits on mental health and stress reduction while also effecting nearly every aspect of your life. They also use art similarly to how other people use meditation, introspection, and journaling. It clears your mind while still allowing it to be active at the same time. Art also allows them to create something original and is completely their own. This gives people a sense of purpose and fulfillment that carries over into almost every aspect of their lives.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study was limited in scope because it was not able to include those younger than 19 in its research. Future studies should focus on identifying and following why adolescents get into art and what factors keep them there throughout their lives into adulthood. This would give you a more precise look into why people get into art in the first place and what factors could possibly drive them away or keep them from the field of art. They could also do it longitudinally to find these answers. This study was also on the lower end of participants. Unfortunately, this study's participant search coincided with the Covid-19 outbreak, which severely limited our participant contact and accessibility. Future studies likely will not have this same problem and

should have access to more subjects. Studies incorporating why non-artists do not partake in art would provide a wonderful insight to this field as well. Following research should delve further into the differences in perspectives between full time professional artists and those who incorporate it as a hobby; perhaps questioning if having art as your main source of income alter its benefits in any way?

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## **Appendix I**

Subject number-

This interview's purpose is to see how artist use their art for their emotional wellbeing and how others can potentially use it. Anyone who spends time making art on a weekly basis can take part in this interview. The interview portion should last approximately 10 to 20 minutes. Your responses will be completely anonymous, and you will be assigned a subject number. This interview will be recorded but it will not be distributed or used for any use other than this research and any direct quotations used will be associated with your subject number for your privacy. There are no direct risks associated with this study and you can decline any question or end your participation at any time with no penalty. This studies benefits include expanding our knowledge of how art can be applied to help people in their everyday lives.

- When did you first start to get into art?
- What factors drew you to art initially and then now?
- What is your relationship with art? Artist? Observer?
- What types of art do you usually engage in and why?
- What do you enjoy most about art?
- How does art allow you to express yourself in ways that other activities do not?
- Are there specific times or situations where you prefer or tend to make art?
- Do you have a specific goal in mind when you create or observe art?
- What role, if any, does producing or observing art play into your overall emotional well-being?
- Is art more or less helpful than other ways of dealing with stress or well-being?
- Would you advise others to look towards art as a form of relief? Why or Why not?

Contact for questions or concern

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