



August 2024 News and Notes The Healthful Benefits of Creativity By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Among its many attributes, creativity is credited with strengthening our emotional health and wellbeing in several ways. “Engaging in creative activities can provide individuals with a sense of empowerment, improved emotional well-being, and valuable coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of mental health and illness.”²

The Importance of Play

In fact, an affinity for creativity begins in our earliest years. According to Jennifer A. Perry, former VP of worldwide publishing at Sesame Workshop and executive director of Perry Educational Projects Consulting, “By exploring imagination and creativity through art, storytelling, interactive games, music, and all kinds of play, children learn lifelong skills: How to express themselves, communicate with others, problem solve, develop self-confidence, appreciate diverse ideas and cultures, and find things that make them feel fulfilled and happy.”

Similarly the National Institute for Play states, “A huge amount of existing scientific research from neurophysiology, developmental and cognitive psychology, to animal play behavior, and evolutionary and molecular biology contains rich data on play. The existing research describes patterns and states of play and explains how play shapes our brains, creates our competencies, and ballasts our emotions.”³

Creativity in the Brain

When researchers have looked into the science of creativity, the findings have been surprising. Based on neuroimaging, they discovered the creative process, “often involves coordination between the cognitive control network, which is involved in executive functions such as planning and problem-solving, and the default mode network, which is most active during mind-wandering or daydreaming.” Cognitive neuroscientist Adam Green, PhD, asserts, “The cooperation of those networks may be a unique feature of creativity. These two systems are usually antagonistic. They rarely work together, but creativity seems to be one instance where they do.”

Within the brain, creative thinking apparently involves two different processes: “What cognitive scientists call “System 1” (also called “Type 1”) processes: quick, unconscious thoughts—aha moments—that burst into consciousness. A second route involves “System 2” processes: thinking that is slow, deliberate, and conscious.”⁴

Physical Health & Resilience

According to Cathy Malchiodi, in her article, “Creativity as a Wellness Practice,” “studies indicate that creative self-expression and exposure to the arts have wide-ranging effects on not only cognitive and psychosocial health, but also physical conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, various forms of dementia and cancer.

“One of the most compelling studies was recently conducted by the Mayo Clinic and proposed that people who engage in art activities (painting, drawing and sculpting; crafts, like woodworking, pottery, ceramics, quilting, quilling, and sewing) in middle and old age may delay cognitive decline in very old age. These findings underscore the idea that it is possible to build a ‘cognitive reserve’ through engaging in novel, creative experiences that have a protective effect on the brain.”

Malchiodi concludes: “Any kind of regular practice in creative engagement allows people to work through stresses, difficulties, and even trauma through creative self-expression.”

More than emotional and cognitive health, creativity aids the development of physical resilience. “On a biological level, resilience also helps us to better cope with loss and supports our immune system . . . which are all reasons why greater resilience has been shown to boost longevity, too.” 6

1. [https://www.wellandgood.com/creativity and longevity/az](https://www.wellandgood.com/creativity-and-longevity/az)
2. <https://mind.help/topic/creativity/>
3. <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-creativity-positively-impacts-your-health-5113162>
4. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/04/cover-science-creativity>
5. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/arts-and-health/201512/creativity-wellness-practice>
6. [https://www.wellandgood.com/creativity and longevity/az](https://www.wellandgood.com/creativity-and-longevity/az)