

Evidence brief: how the arts can support mental health and wellbeing in adulthood

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Introduction

This briefing describes key findings from the Social Biobehavioural Research Group's research into arts engagement and mental health in adulthood. The findings here are taken from our longer report, *The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health: Findings from Major Cohort Studies in the UK and USA 2017 – 2022*, available at: www.sbbresearch.org. We encourage people to read the referenced research papers in full before using them to develop policies or services.

Headlines

- Adults who participate in arts and culture have better mental health and higher life satisfaction.
- People who engage in arts and culture experience less depression in later life and feel that life is more worthwhile, which in turn is linked to a range of physical health benefits.
- Arts interventions may support the alleviation of mental illness including postnatal depression.
- Policies to protect, promote and equalise arts offerings throughout the lifespan are needed

Background

A large body of evidence exists for the role that the arts can play in preventing and managing mental ill health (1). However, much of this research is small scale and has generally focused on short term effects of arts engagement for health. Seeking to explore long-term effects, we've used large datasets from cohort studies, which track the health and activities of thousands of randomly sampled people over many years and decades, to identify population-level links between mental health and arts engagement over time. This complements our larger scale clinical trials investigating the effects of targeted arts projects for people with mental health conditions.

Arts participation and cultural attendance

Based on the questions asked of the participants in the cohort studies we used, we have broadly investigated two 'categories' of arts and cultural engagement, as follows:

Arts participation

Dance • singing • making or writing music • participating in drama, opera, musical theatre, carnival and street arts • learning circus skills • painting • drawing • printmaking • sculpture • photography • film and video making • animations • textile, embroidery or knitting work • wood crafts, • reading for pleasure and book clubs • creative writing

Cultural attendance

Cinema • exhibitions, video or electronic art events • literature events • public art displays • carnivals • festivals, • circus • plays, drama performances • pantomimes • musicals • opera • live music performances (classical, rock, pop, or jazz) • ballet, contemporary dance • other cultural arts events.

Mental health and coping

Our analysis of data from around 23,000 people has shown that both frequent arts participation *and* cultural attendance are linked to **better mental health (lower mental distress) and higher life satisfaction** (2). Notably, these results were maintained even when we accounted for demographics, socio-economic background, personality, past medical history, past life experiences, and previous arts engagement (2).

We also found that people who engaged in arts activities reported a **greater ability to cope with mental health problems in everyday life**. However, for cultural attendance we didn't find the same link to coping, even though it was linked to less negative feelings and more happiness (2). This suggests that despite its other benefits, cultural attendance may not alter the psychological or behavioural factors relating to coping in the way that the act of 'participation' in arts activities does (2).

Regulating emotions

The ability to regulate our emotions is fundamentally linked to our mental health. Our research suggests there may be three main categories of emotion regulation strategies that can be activated when we engage in arts and culture:

- **Avoidance:** the arts create a safe space away from our worries, redirecting attention from unwanted thoughts or feelings, and helping us disengage from problems.
- **Approach:** the arts help us to come to terms with our emotions, to think rationally about things in our life, vent negative feelings, and actively plan for how to solve problems.
- **Self-development:** the arts enhance our self-identity, self-esteem, and agency, reassuring us about our abilities, and making us feel more able to tackle challenges (3).

Older adulthood: mental health

We found that adults aged 50+ had a **lower risk of developing depression** over the following 10 years if they visited cultural venues every few months or more (4). Socio-economic position only explains half of this relationship, suggesting that **the arts have an independent role in preventing depression** (5).

Group participation (e.g. choir, dance, photography, theatre, and music groups) is linked to multiple positive aspects of wellbeing in later life, **including life satisfaction and purpose in life** (6). In our studies there was also **less reported loneliness** among those who engaged in cultural activities. Again, these results were maintained when controlling for socio-demographic, social, health, and behavioural factors.

Adults who engaged in community and cultural activities also experienced **subsequent increases in how worthwhile they felt their lives were, compared to those who did not** (7). This was linked to many other health benefits: fewer long-standing illnesses and chronic diseases, less depression, lower pain levels, improved immune function, and lower levels of obesity (8).

How much engagement is necessary?

In our study of cultural engagement and depression, we found 32% lower odds of developing depression if people engaged **every few months** and 48% lower odds if they engaged **monthly or more** (4). Similarly, community arts groups were more beneficial for older adults' wellbeing if they took part weekly rather than monthly (6). However, there may be a 'ceiling effect', whereby after a certain amount of engagement, more engagement does not lead to further improvements. For example, the link between attending cultural events and decreasing loneliness was strongest if attendance was every few months or more, but a higher frequency did not lead to loneliness decreasing further (19). It is also important that such engagement is **sustained over time**, since wellbeing benefits are not as clear if engagement is only short-term (e.g. over one year) (20).

Spotlight: arts interventions for mental health

In addition to our longitudinal work, we have conducted trials and sub-studies to explore how artistic activities can help people with mental illnesses. Key findings from these include:

- **Drumming for mental health:** in a 10-week programme of group drumming workshops for people accessing mental health services, a single drumming session led to short-term improvements in stress, tiredness, happiness, relaxation, and energy levels (9), whilst drumming over 6 to 10 weeks led to decreases in anxiety and increases in social resilience. These benefits were maintained three months later (11, 12). Drumming also led to reductions in stress hormones, a shift from a pro-inflammatory state (associated with depression) to an anti-inflammatory state (13). Participants reported more positive emotions, more agency, a sense of accomplishment, enhanced self-awareness, and stronger social connections (14).
- **Group singing for people affected by cancer:** In just one hour of singing in a community choir, people experienced mood improvements, decreased stress hormone levels, and increased activity of the immune system (15). Similar positive effects were seen when we compared people who sang in the choir weekly for three months with those who did not, as the singing group experienced significantly greater decreases in anxiety and increases in wellbeing compared to the non-singing group (15). People bereaved due to cancer also experienced gradual improvements in their self-efficacy and self-esteem, whilst in the non-singing group these worsened (16). The singers reporting building resilience, confidence and coping mechanisms, as well as gaining skills and a sense of identity (17).
- **Singing for postnatal depression (PND):** Engaging in a 10-week programme of group singing led to a faster reduction of mothers' symptoms of PND compared to groups of women who received usual care on the NHS or usual care plus social groups (18). Mothers also continued to sing to their babies longer term more than the control group, as did their partners (19). In just one 90-minute singing workshop perceptions of mother-infant closeness increased much more than in the non-singing group, as did decreases in the stress hormone cortisol (20).

Policy and practice considerations

- Increasing arts engagement has the [potential to reduce the prevalence of mental illness](#). Indeed, our research has shown that when people are more engaged in the arts, they make more use of outpatient health services and less use of inpatient services, suggesting [arts engagement supports early diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems](#).
- These health benefits will happen if we [normalise and facilitate arts and cultural engagement as part of all our daily lives](#); since our work in other areas has shown that people living in more deprived areas may benefit even more from arts engagement than those in more affluent areas, [improving arts provision in less affluent areas is a clear priority](#).
- Creative [social prescribing schemes](#) may support people experiencing loneliness and common mental health problems; known risk factors for more severe physical and mental health problems.

Contact

Social Biobehavioural Research Group
Department of Behavioural Science and Health
1-19 Torrington Place
London WC1E 7HB

sbbresearch@ucl.ac.uk • www.sbbresearch.org • Twitter: [@UCL_SBB](https://twitter.com/UCL_SBB)

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