

Get involved in the arts and invest in your health

by Nancy Cooley,
Arts Health Network Canada

Being involved with the arts is fun, but did you know that it can contribute to your health? The benefits come from active involvement like dancing, singing, and painting and more receptive involvement, such as going to a concert or the theatre, strolling through an art gallery, or going to a local arts festival. Researchers in the United States and Scandinavia found that the benefits include living longer, feeling more positive about your physical, mental, and social health, and even reduced risk of some diseases.

In the U.S., researchers studied seniors in three American cities. Their ages ranged from 65 to 103, with an average age of 80 years. The seniors who were involved once a week in professionally taught arts classes showed:

- better health, fewer doctor visits, and less medication use
- more positive responses on mental health measures
- more involvement in other activities
- more independence and less need for institutional care.

These seniors were compared to seniors in control groups being studied at the same time in the same cities. The seniors in the control groups were as socially connected and active as the other groups, but they were involved in things that were not arts-based. This group did not show an improvement in their health. In fact, their health declined.

Just showing up improves health outcomes

In Sweden, researchers had found that simple attendance at cultural events seemed to be related to living longer. They did some further research to find out if it mattered how often people did things like going to



the cinema, theatre, concerts, museums or art exhibits. They found that those who changed their arts activities over time also changed their perceived health. Those who became more culturally active became more positive about their personal health.

Modern technologies such as brain scans reveal that even an activity as seemingly passive as reading stimulates the brain. When we read vivid descriptions of sensations, emotions, and actions in a novel, it stimulates the same sections of the brain. It is as if we are actually smelling, eating, feeling, or doing something active.

Two recent studies have revealed that “individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective.” These are all skills that help us to avoid isolation and loneliness -- conditions that contribute to failing health.

So pick up that novel, go to the theatre, visit an art gallery, enjoy a concert. It can improve your health.

Learn more

Visit www.artshealthnetwork.ca, especially the *Arts & Health 101* and *Resources* sections.

About the Author

Nancy Cooley, Arts Health Network Canada
Cooley & Associates, Inc. 250-391-4660/ncooley@direct.ca