



Creativity and Mental Health – Does Making Things Make Us Happy?

“Two hallmarks of a healthy life are the abilities to love and to work. Each requires imagination.” Freud.

Creativity as portrayed in popular culture has had a mixed relationship with wellbeing and mental health – from images of mad professors blowing up chemistry labs as they experiment with new ideas to tortured artists struggling in profound poverty, creativity has often been linked with significant costs. Those have included financial security, physical health and emotional wellbeing. Indeed, a recent systematic review of the relationship between bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders and artistic professions notes a statistically significant link (Kyaga, 2018). However, there has also been an appreciation of the salutary potential of creativity where imagination, innovation and originality has been linked with improved emotional wellbeing, reduced symptomatic distress and increased sense of identity and self-esteem. Some of the evidence indicating these benefits will be outlined below.

The notion of ‘creativity’ has bamboozled philosophers and thinkers for decades, with ongoing debates regarding what it exactly means. One article “The Standard Definition of Creativity” toutsles with this problem and has been cited over 2500 times (Runco and Jaeger, 2012). The upshot is that most definitions indicate that a creative act uses imagination to bring about something original and innovative. Creativity can range across multiple domains of human experience and does not need to be restricted to activities traditionally seen as ‘artistic’. It can include ways of communicating, formal artistic endeavours or patterns of thinking that help solve a problem. Creativity can also be closely linked to experiences of play (see associated fact sheet *Benefit of Play – what does the evidence say?*) and mindfulness (see associated fact sheet *Mindfulness; Theory and Practice*).

Several small studies in the past few years have indicated that creative acts such as improvised theatre, expressive writing and rap music can lead to improvements in creative thinking, self-esteem, self-efficacy, disordered eating, sense of identity and connection with others (Schwenke, Dshemuchadse, Rasehorn et al, 2021; Richards, Hoskin, Maddox II et al, 2019; Ramsey-Wade, Williamson & Meyrick, 2021). A study examining the impact of a 10 week art therapy course for those struggling with personality vulnerabilities pointed to medium to large effect sizes on the participants’ emotional wellbeing, mindfulness levels and reduced symptom distress (Haeyena, van Hoorenc, van der Veldf et al, 2018) whilst a systematic review exploring the impact of creative arts activities in school on children’s wellbeing also suggested positive effects. The latter review did note, however, that the research quality in this area was somewhat mixed (Moula, Aithal, Karkou et al, 2020).

Interestingly, neuroscientific research has noted some links between creativity and mindfulness, although the research attempting to map creativity to brain states remains in its infancy and it is difficult to rely on definitive findings. Some studies indicate that there are different patterns of electrical signals across brain structures when someone is engaged in a creative task versus others, and neuroimaging studies implicate heightened use of the prefrontal cortex in creative states (Fink and Benadek, 2013). The importance of the pre-frontal cortex and executive function is examined in an associated fact sheet (see *Neuroception and the Mind/Body System*). Future research may more firmly establish a link between creative states, mindfulness and improved integrated brain function (Capurso, Fabbro and Crescentini, 2014).



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