

ART AND MENTAL WELLBEING

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ABSTRACT

Art, in its diverse forms, plays a profound role in mental wellbeing by fostering emotional expression, resilience, and self-discovery. This study explores the intricate connection between art and mental health, emphasizing how artistic engagement enhances self-esteem, relieves stress, and promotes psychological healing. Drawing inspiration from nature's artistry, the paper highlights how creativity is inherent in all living beings, from weaver birds to human craftsmen. By examining the struggles and triumphs of renowned artists and writers such as J.K. Rowling, Ruskin Bond, and Emily Brontë, it illustrates how art can transform adversity into inspiration. Additionally, the paper sheds light on the contributions of differently-abled artists, such as those associated with the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists, who use creativity as a medium for empowerment. The impact of art festivals, community engagement, and performance arts in fostering mental resilience is also analyzed. Furthermore, the paper underscores the need for educational reforms that integrate creative arts into learning to nurture emotionally strong individuals. Art therapy emerges as a crucial tool in addressing mental health challenges, helping individuals process trauma, reduce anxiety, and experience fulfillment. Conclusively, the study asserts that art is more than an aesthetic pursuit—it is a vital force in human life that provides emotional sustenance, cultivates joy, and promotes overall mental wellbeing.

Keywords: Art, Mental Wellbeing, Creativity, Emotional Expression, Art Therapy, Resilience, Healing

Introduction

“It is twice blest; It blesseth him
that gives and him that takes”

Though Portia is signifying the virtue of mercy while persuading Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare; yet the lines are quite apt for the artist and the perceiver too. As the recasting sky changes its hues from crimson to purple and from purple to deep grey, what an immense joy we feel to behold the creation of the greatest artisan that is Nature. How serene one feels to look at the majestic snow-clad peaks as the background to the lush green landscape! Mother nature has created so much art with great finesse in waterfalls, mountains, hills, valleys, rocks, rivers, oceans, flora and fauna. We wonder at the artistry of the master artisan. If so much pleasure is felt by the beholder, then what to speak of the joy felt by the creator? Nature extends her delight in the form of radiant sun on winter mornings and exuberant rains on scorching days. She showers her blessings with beautiful tapestries of wild flowers full of gleeful colors and scents and fruit trees overloaded with bumper produce.

Being a part of Nature, all living beings remain inseparably connected to art all through their lives. A weaver bird builds an incredible structure in the form of intricately woven nest to weave a home, to woo the girl and to start a family in the trees. The resourceful bird uses strings, twines, plant fibers or twigs depending upon the available building materials. One nest requires about a thousand strands. This master craftsman will often make multiple nests over the course of the mating season. According to BBC1, most weaver males never become parents. But its artistry cannot be underestimated on account of that. Then, we have most adorable male peacock performing enthralling dance to win the heart of a female. This fond lover may not succeed in winning the heart of his beloved peahen but its captivating dance conquers the hearts of millions. Art is something inherent and intrinsic. It is inseparably ingrained in the lives of all living creatures. The focus of this study is human art forms and their impact on life. Art is unlimited in the forms of visual and performing arts such as traditional craft, sculpture, painting, digital art, dance, film, literature, music, singing, gardening and the culinary arts. But art is not restricted to these forms. In fact, there is art in everything. If a teacher knows how to impart knowledge appealingly to their students- there is art in it. If a homemaker knows how to prepare simple, nutritious yet tasty meals in an economical way- there is art in it. If a parent raises a child to be a kind, independent, emotionally strong and happy individual- there is art in it. If a person knows how to live merrily against all odds- there is art in it. M.C. Richards, the American poet, potter and writer, best known for her book- ‘Centering: in Pottery, Poetry and the Person’ had once stated,

“All arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life.” A beautiful creation created with two hands has a unique charm in itself which is absent in machine-made product. When one knits a sweater for their loved one; this seems to be the highest expression of pure love. So much affection is put in every loop of it. Little children love to draw and paint. Parents bring drawing books for them when they are just two or three years of age to boost their creativity and make them learn with fun.

“We don’t need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better,” said J K Rowling. How Rowling went from being a single mom to Harry Potter author and philanthropist? In 1993 she was facing the toughest period of her life when she was divorced, jobless and a single mother of an infant. She suffered severe bouts of depression yet she persevered. She kept pushing through the trials life would throw at her. She lived in a small flat while going to cafes to write ‘Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.’ When her world was gloomy and dark, she found the light at the end of a tunnel. At one point of time, she even thought of committing suicide. Not one or two, around 12 major publications rejected the Potter script. She might be shattered but was not defeated. The rest is history; her series sold over 600 million copies, and has been translated into 84 languages and spawned a global media franchise including films and video games. But apart from the success story, during her worst days, the magical world of innocent Harry was there to sustain her. As she made Potter defeat evil with his pure, fair soul, it was indeed Rowling healing herself while conquering her failures at the personal front. How soothing it must have been for her soul to create something so beautiful when her own life had taken an ugly turn! Ruskin Bond, the most adorable author among Indians, too made some very interesting diary entries, wrote novels and short stories while he was still struggling to establish himself as a successful writer and has had an insecure life in a rickety house at Mussoorie. Many of his works later became a part of curriculum for school and college students. Next, we have Emily Bronte who lived a secluded life most of the time, yet could bring about all her unrevealed and fathomless passions into her one and only novel ‘Wuthering Heights.’ There are hundreds of other writers and artists, we can relate to, who suffered a lot yet moved on to win the battles of life and ultimately became popular and successful.

But one doesn't need to be a Rowling or Bond or Bronte to adhere to artistic pursuits. One can be an artist not to be renowned and rich, but for personal relief, fulfilment and wellbeing. “Creativity is not limited to those who are celebrated as great artists or performers. We may also appreciate creativity in embroidery, cookery, or in an exceptionally beautiful flowerbed. Taking a walk through a DDA colony we may be struck by the transformation of an ugly staircase by a creative arrangement of earthen pots. Creativity is an everyday phenomenon.”² To give an outlet to pent up emotions is of utmost importance for mental wellbeing. The only condition being – there should be a little bit of love and fondness into whatever one intends to do. One should try to be honest not popular. Beethoven had once said “I have never thought of writing for reputation and honor. What I have in my mind must come out; that is the reason why I compose.”

Next, hundred percent engrossment into something artistic is a kind of meditation too which brings infinite joy in return. It can be considered more beneficial and effective than meditating or performing asanas, as mind tends to drift sometimes. However, while creating something of choice, one has to bring all the senses together to make it work. Art is the best food for our soul. One also learns a lot in the process. Engagement in anything creative keeps one away from sad thoughts, loneliness and depression which subsequently culminate in mental disorders. It enhances self-esteem, confidence and a sense of worthiness. Creativity opens up the gates to self- discovery and self-awareness which is a mammoth task. One gets transported into an enchanting world of casts and colors. Performing or creating something beautiful leads to the secretion of happy hormones dopamine and serotonin in the body that strengthens immune system while simultaneously adjusting brain waves to ensure a calm mind for a good night’s sleep which directly affects our mental wellbeing.

The Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists (AMFPA) is a for- profit international organization, working across 71 countries, facilitating the sale of artwork produced by differently abled mouth and foot painting artists associated with the organization. The main objectives of this association are to find as many mouth & foot painting artists as possible, to protect and nurture their interests, improve their working and living conditions and encourage their artistic abilities and skills, in particular, by promoting the commercial use of their work. This art movement

enables these artists to live with dignity through their art like never before. Every piece of art created by these self-determined artists is more than a creation- it's a lifeline. They use their mouths and feet to express what words can't. Each work tells a thousand tales of passion and perseverance. Their dreams, their struggles and their victories get reflected with each stroke. Their art stirs the soul and is a live demonstration of how beauty springs from overcoming adversity. "Art is where it all begins, but for our artists, it is the key to so much more. It's a doorway to independence, a pathway to confidence, and a canvas where dreams take flight. Through their art, they have found a voice that reaches beyond the canvas, touching lives and hearts around the world. And now their creativity blossoms into something even greater- transforming everyday objects into works of art that carry their spirit."³

One of the largest festivals of its kind in the world, the Annual Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF) brings together communities, artists and activities from all over Scotland to be creative and engage with art events to explore mental health, including film, theatre, literature, visual arts, dance and comedy. Whereas Indians, deeply rooted in religion, engage in performing arts, mostly, during festivals and auspicious occasions. This engagement in social activities and interaction within communities helps people rejuvenate their dull and monotonous life. The so-called non- performers too love to sing their hearts out and dance tirelessly to invigorate themselves.

Nowadays so much emphasis is put on improving the emotional quotient of students; thus, making them more resilient. By introducing new life skills programs as a part of their curriculum, the authorities want to equip youth to face all the challenges life throws at them. There is a dire need to change the way parents and teachers deem their children and students. The suicide rate at coaching centers is alarming and raises the big question- are we giving birth to an utterly disillusioned, weak and mentally unstable generation? It is time to rethink education. It is time to bring major changes in the conventional pedagogical methods. With the mushrooming of therapeutic centers and the flood of numerous books related to art and mental wellbeing, we notice a general awareness among people about it. But we can't deny the fact that our society is sharply divided into two halves- the haves and have-nots; the literates and the illiterates. While the privileged have access to better education and better facilities; the underprivileged remain devoid of basic amenities. Mental disorders choose their victims indiscriminately and a poor, jobless individual stands more vulnerable to that. Thanks to social media, educated people are well informed about the ways they can adhere to, to cope with mental stress and all; whereas, uneducated people, living in want, hardly even realize they are suffering from some mental disorder. Moreover, the social stigma attached to it intensifies the gravity of situation. The problem is more serious with underdeveloped nations. Lack of funds is one of the major hurdles for the governments. The existing funds should be utilized for the better health and educational facilities. People should support and elect the parties which prioritize such issues in their election manifestos. Non- profit institutions with the motto 'Healing through Art' should be put up for the downtrodden too.

"Statistically, 1 in 4 people experiences a mental health issue in their lifetime. Therefore, the likelihood of a family member, partner, or a friend requiring support at some point is almost inevitable."⁴ Incompatible and toxic relations, societal and economic pressures, trauma, abuse, ageing, physical disability and joblessness trigger isolation, stress, anxiety and depression. Genetic disorders too can contribute to mental illness, but it is usually a combination of genetic and environmental factors. A proper understanding of prominent mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders will lead to an empathetic approach towards sufferers. There is a need for more in- depth study to look at particular conditions or problems and how therapies act as a treatment for mental health. Every person's mental health journey is personal and unique to them; therefore, therapies will have varying effects. Performance arts give opportunity to an individual to express themselves and feel relieved. As mentioned earlier, many renowned writers, painters, actors, and singers have struggled with mental health. Subsequently, this proved to be a blessing in disguise for them as it acted as a driving force within their performance. The 1947 Constitution of the World Health Organization states, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In an extensive research conducted by WHO in 2019, over 3000 studies and over 700 individual cases were studied to collect evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing. It was found that along with encouraging health-promoting behaviors (e.g. through promoting healthy living and encouraging engagement with health care, through their role

in health communication, reducing health related stigma and engaging marginalized or hard to reach groups), arts also help prevent ill health (including enhancing wellbeing and mental health, reducing the impact of trauma, and risk of cognitive decline, frailty and premature mortality). “Participating in art activities can build self- esteem, self- acceptance, confidence and self- worth, which all help to protect against mental illness.”⁵

Like virtue, art is its own reward. Art is so much fun when performed without any presumption of credit, prize, fame, money or accolades. Abraham Lincoln too had said, “I am not bound to succeed but I am bound to live up to what light I have.” We shall have to discover our joie de vivre and zest for life. How many times we have come across a cobbler, a tailor, a chaiwallah and a driver listening to nonstop FM radio music to amuse themselves through a dreary routine. There is a therapist within us all. All are born artists in one way or another. God has bestowed each one of us with some inherent talent. Nature has a unique mechanism for compensating all. Like people with autism may have strengths – including excellence in maths, science, music and art. The trick lies in perceiving that innate gift and let it bloom. And joy is something intrinsic to our soul. But unfortunately, most people hardly realize their real self. Their whole lot of precious lifespan goes to waste in discontent and regrets. Moreover, the biggest dilemma faced by the world today is all pervasive insensitivity, which is the root cause of most of the sufferings. In such a scenario, art comes to rescue. It is better to rely more and more on art than on relationships for emotional wellbeing. Gaurav Upadhyay, a new age Hindi author and ideator on social media, has put the idea more succinctly- “You, me and that five-year-old kid, all are good painters. God sends humans with the power to create, but not everyone is painting beautifully. Some don’t have brushes in their hands, some don’t get a plain canvas, some have dried up colors and some have no reason to paint. Some are never being told by anyone that they too can paint well. I know that even if they try, not everyone’s paintings will turn out beautiful. But the sad part is that people are being made to believe that if they can’t paint beautiful pictures, then there is no point in picking up the brush. They are being told that only the life, which fits into some definitions, is meaningful. I am a painter and can feel the pain of those who keep regretting that they could have painted a picture too. I wish God gives courage to all these hands to pick the brush, so that no one should have regrets in the last moments of life for not painting.”

As I watch the exemplary Olympians
Exhibiting their spectacular feats
Their effortless performance
Of the most arduous tasks
Beyond imagination are
Their grit and perseverance
My eyes turn moist
Every time the winners are
Medalled to the tunes of
National anthems in the backdrop
My heart overflows with appraisal, emotion
And a defeated sense of self.
I could never be what they are
But my elation turned me into a poet.
Then I see the learned scholars
Geniuses of all ages
Gifted with rare aptitude and talent
Their single-minded dedication
Consistent efforts with sheer determination
What an intellect!
What a creative power!
Harbingers of a newer, better world
Overwhelmed and awed

I clap with the world
As they are proclaimed Nobel Laureates
I float like a tiny speck
In their infinite sea of learning
I could never be what they are
But my awareness turned me into a poet.
And lo, the conscientious sculptors
How they engrave
Lifelike desired shapes
And airs on stone
So superbly?
And bright musicians
What bent of mind!
That captures a piece of poetry
Into the most alluring melody?
Inventive painters too
But how they brush
Varied hues of life
So appealingly on a small canvas?
Exuberant dancers next
Make intense moves so exquisitely
Merging passion into all engrossing art.
Fair actors as well
How they melt their being
Into a different persona
So convincingly indeed?
I adore these scintillating wizards
My entire body quivers joyfully
In unison with their arts
I could be none of them, though
But my exhilaration turned me into a poet.

Conclusion

Art, in its myriad forms, holds immense power in shaping mental wellbeing by fostering emotional resilience, self-expression, and personal fulfillment. This study explores the deep-rooted connection between art and mental health, illustrating how artistic engagement provides relief from stress, enhances self-esteem, and serves as a therapeutic outlet for human emotions. Nature itself is the greatest artisan, crafting breathtaking landscapes, vibrant flora, and intricate ecosystems, bringing joy to the beholder. Similarly, creativity is innate to all living beings, as seen in the weaver bird's intricate nests or the peacock's mesmerizing dance.

Human artistry manifests in countless forms, from visual and performing arts to everyday acts of creativity such as cooking, teaching, and homemaking. Through the inspiring journeys of renowned artists like J.K. Rowling, Ruskin Bond, and Emily Brontë—who channeled personal struggles into literary brilliance—the study highlights how art can transform adversity into creative triumph. Many celebrated artists have battled mental health challenges, using their craft as a means of healing and self-discovery.

Beyond individual expression, art fosters community engagement and social connectivity. Initiatives like the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists (AMFPA) empower differently-abled artists, enabling them to earn a livelihood and express themselves through creativity. Similarly, large-scale events like the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF) bring together artists and communities to explore mental health through various artistic expressions.

Art's role in education is equally vital. The modern emphasis on emotional intelligence and life skills education seeks to equip students with resilience and coping mechanisms. However, rising stress levels among students, particularly in competitive environments, highlight the need for integrating creative pursuits into mainstream education to promote holistic wellbeing. The alarming rates of mental health issues among young people necessitate a shift in pedagogical approaches, ensuring that students are nurtured emotionally, not just intellectually.

Art therapy, recognized by organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), plays a significant role in mental health treatment. Engaging in creative activities stimulates dopamine and serotonin production, enhancing mood, reducing anxiety, and promoting relaxation. The transformative power of art lies in its ability to provide an outlet for emotions, cultivate self-awareness, and instill a sense of purpose.

Ultimately, the study asserts that art is not merely a source of entertainment or skill but a fundamental necessity for emotional balance and inner peace. It is a universal language that transcends barriers, offering solace, healing, and a means of self-exploration to all who embrace it.

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