



Strengthening Mental Health with The Arts

By: Vice President of Research Randy Cohen

Americans are stressed—the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, polarizing politics, remote learning for students, unemployment, a fragile economy—so it is no surprise that mental health issues are spiking across the country. The U.S. Census Bureau [reports](#) that one-third of the population is showing signs of anxiety or depression—a tripling from just the previous year. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that nearly half of Americans report the pandemic is harming their mental health.

As Lieutenant Governors seek to maintain the wellness and mental health of their residents amidst challenged state budgets, new research shows the arts are an effective resource in reducing depression and anxiety and increase life satisfaction—improving both quality of care and the financial bottom line.

The Arts Aid in the Mental and Emotional Recovery of Patients

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the benefits—and prevalence—of arts programs being used in healthcare systems. A 2007 [survey of arts in healthcare institutions](#) conducted by The Joint Commission—which accredits the nation's 22,000 hospitals and healthcare entities—showed that nearly half of these institutions have active arts programs (45%), and all indicators point to an even larger percentage today. When hospital administrators were asked, “Why the arts?” 80% of the respondents said because “they aid in the mental and emotional recovery of patients.”

Arts in healthcare programs are as diverse as the arts themselves. The most common are permanent visual art displays, performances in public spaces, and bedside art activities for patients. Patient activities include music, dance and movement, arts and crafts, and creative writing. Many hospitals have “art carts” that make the rounds to the patients and may even include poster art so patients can personally select a visual image to hang on their hospital room wall.

As we have been reminded during the pandemic, the mental health challenges extend well beyond those who are ill. Families and medical staff are under enormous stress, emotional strain, and isolation. Many arts in healthcare programs extend beyond the patients with the purpose of strengthening the entire healing system: 58% of programs serve the patient's family and 42% are for staff to help them deal with the stress and anxiety of their working environment. Some hospitals even boast their own staff orchestras. Research shows that the availability of arts programs in hospitals [reduces nursing staff turnover](#), which a significant money saver for healthcare systems.

Arts Heal the Mental and Emotional Injuries of Military Service Members

There are more than half a million military service members who are living with conditions that compromise their mental health and well-being, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Service members bearing these invisible

wounds are finding treatment and healing through the arts. [Creative Forces](#)—a partnership between the U.S. Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and the National Endowment for the Arts—is built on a foundation of clinical research that connects artistic expression (drawing, music, dance, and creative writing) with positive benefits on brain function, mood and overall wellness. Published studies on Creative Forces documents benefits such as fewer flashbacks and nightmares, improved self-regulation of anger and anxiety, ability to cope with loss and grief, and more hope and confidence. The arts are providing new hope and relief for millions of service members, their families, and healthcare providers.

Just 30 Minutes Per Day of the Arts to Improve Mental Health

“COVID-19 and Social Distancing: Impact of Arts and Other Activities on Mental Health” is an ongoing [study](#) tracking 72,000 adults in the UK to gauge the pandemic’s impact on mental health. The study demonstrates that the arts provide mental health benefits to the public—even during the pandemic—combating the ill effects of isolation and loneliness associated with COVID-19. Preliminary findings show that just 30 minutes of active arts activities daily may lower anxiety and depression and increase life satisfaction (reading for pleasure, playing or listening to music, gardening, engaging in a creative hobby). Begun by University College London in the UK, the study has been extended to the U.S. in partnership with the University of Florida and Americans for the Arts, with U.S. results expected in spring 2021.

Similar arts and mental health work done previously in the UK has resulted in major health policy changes, including [Arts on Prescription](#), which provides funding and a structure for healthcare providers to prescribe patients engagement in arts activities. The medical professional writes a script, as usual, but instead of a visit to the pharmacy for a jar of capsules, the patient is connected with a local arts organization so they can partake in a series of arts experience (e.g., choirs, book clubs, drama groups, community gardens).

State & Local Arts Agencies are Leading the Way in Arts and Mental Health

69% of [Americans believe](#) the arts “lift me up beyond everyday experiences,” 73% feel the arts give them “pure pleasure to experience and participate in,” and 81% say the arts are a “positive experience in a troubled world.” With those benefits, it is no wonder that 68% of [Americans agree](#) that the arts improve health and the healthcare experience—and 73% favor government funding for arts in healthcare programs. [State arts agencies](#) support arts programs that address a vast array of mental and physical health issues—PTSD, chronic illnesses, Alzheimer’s, neurological disorders and brain injuries, opioid addiction, and more. The arts are a proven contributor in keeping us mentally healthy, helping us heal when we are not well, and reducing healthcare costs.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Jay Dick, Americans for the Arts’ Senior Director of State and Local Government Affairs at jay@artsusa.org