

Mindfulness and museums

Can a museum visit improve your mental health?
The arts and culture sector has recently begun to gain backing from medical professionals as a method of improving a patient's mental health and wellbeing, tackling issues such as anxiety and depression. For many, visiting a museum, gallery or another cultural institution may be an unusual activity, but it is because such an activity is isolated and distanced from our everyday routine that it has the potential to remove one from the environment that causes so much stress and anxiety, into a space that is free from negativity and the anxiety triggers of everyday life. Visiting arts and cultural organisations includes active and passive participation and can include a variety of activities such as performing arts, visual arts, literature, culture and online arts to improve mental health.¹ Does the experience require the validation of a medical professional to be considered worthwhile?

During the coronavirus pandemic, lockdowns and long periods of isolation increased loneliness and vulnerabilities from the lack of socialisation in many individuals. The increased chance of psychological and mental turmoil from isolation can trigger anxiety and depression among individuals, and these stressful events impact our physical and psychological wellbeing. In some cases, having conditions like psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis can have an emotional impact as “physical appearance means low self-esteem and anxiety are common among people with the condition. This can lead to depression, especially if the psoriasis gets worse”.² External factors such as stress, in some cases, cause a physical response from the body in ways such as immune response and flare-ups; these triggers can impact an individual’s self-esteem and be factors for not wanting to engage in outdoor social activities. This, therefore, creates a perpetual cycle of anxiety and depression from self-imposed isolation.

Furthermore, attending social events with the backdrop of cultural organisations such as museums and galleries brings like-minded people together who also feel their mental and physical health requires support. These cultural events can create a sense of bonding and the opportunity to break down the barriers to leaving the comfort of their homes and entering an environment disconnected from their mundane routine. These sessions also encourage people to visit places which distract them from the ordinary routine of everyday lives. Many cultural organisations are well equipped to offer accessibility support to make visits easier and stress-free.

The NHS released The NHS Long Term Plan in

January 2019, outlining its aims and objectives for the next five years. In this report, the NHS outlined its ‘top tips’ for general practice in development by young carers, including policies on accessible preventative health, social prescribing and early referral to local support services.³ This report also plans that, within five years, over 2.5 million more people will have the opportunity to benefit from the policy of social prescribing, a personal health budget and a new support network for self-management of health in collaboration with patients’ groups and the voluntary sector. The creative health inquiry report of 2017 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing outlined the types of activities covered by social prescribing practice, including sessions combining “activities such as gallery talks and tours, discussions, museum object handling and collections-inspired creative activities”.⁴ These activities explore the value of cultural heritage in overcoming social isolation through “touch and wellbeing mediated by cultural artefacts”. The historical objects and heritage sites used to focus these sessions form a way to discuss thoughts and feelings in a social and open setting that attempts to remove barriers that can increase isolation, while the main focus of these activities appears to be on socialisation and how this social aspect is integral to creating a positive psychological impact on wellbeing. The use of historical objects and settings can spark conversations and forms of storytelling that bring people together through a sense of unity.

The concept of medical professionals prescribing museum visits for patients who struggle with their mental health took shape and momentum in Brussels, Belgium, in 2021. This concept is part of a three-month project that aimed to “rebuild mental health amid the COVID-19 pandemic” and gave doctors the authority to prescribe museum visits as an appropriate treatment.⁵

The programme allows patients who are treated for stress at Brugmann hospital in Belgian to be “offered free visits to five public museums” to improve their mental state.⁵ This project was inspired by a similar scheme in Quebec, Canada, where doctors can prescribe up to 50 museum visits a year to patients, and Delphine Houba,



responsible for culture in Brussels, emphasised that it “has been shown that art can be beneficial for health, both mental and physical”.⁵

The prescription of museum visits has also gained momentum in the UK, for example, a charity based in Cambridgeshire called Arts and Mind and its project Arts on Prescription. The charity aims to use heritage to improve the health and wellbeing of people experiencing anxiety and depression through weekly art sessions facilitated by professional artists with support from counsellors.⁶ Other programmes include, but are not limited to, the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, which has held a programme since 2005 entitled

Good Times: art for older people that accepts GP referrals of “frail, depressed or lonely people”; it aims to make a conscious effort to engage with older people, in particular men, with socialising and creative workshops, tours and other activities.⁴ The NHS Central and North West London (CNWL) programme called Arts in Health aims to “promote any possibility where art increases health and wellbeing”

through collaborative partnerships, including the British Museum, Brent Museum and Archives, and the Wellcome Art and Health Collection, since 2017.⁷ Research is still ongoing to evaluate how much these programmes impact and improve quality of life for those experiencing anxiety, loneliness and depression. The current research suggests that “taking part in creative activities has a positive effect on physical, emotional and mental wellbeing” by improving quality of life, personal independence, increased self-esteem and confidence, providing opportunities for self-expression and social engagement.⁷

In conclusion, art and cultural activities have the opportunity to improve mental health by removing an individual from an unconstructive environment into a space that is distanced and isolated from the triggers of their everyday routine. Furthermore, prescribing visits to museums to relieve stress is only one factor to improving mental health; another contributing factor is tackling the stigma and wider representation of mental health in a broader context. Mental health needs a positive portrayal in film, television and theatre performances to help reduce undesirable representation and avoid

stereotypes, and increase wider understanding of the illness and associated conditions.¹

The patient also needs to attend these cultural visits, events and activities with an open mind and approach if they are to gain the desired impact. Of course, these visits are not a cure, but could increase social connections, give purpose, and build self-esteem and confidence. The potential for positive benefit and impact these activities and visits have on the general public of all ages and diversity is high. This is one way for museums, galleries and other cultural institutions to encourage untypical visitors to engage in activities that have a positive psychological impact.

For this type of programme to be successful, the activities should be designed in collaboration with creative and medical professionals and the target communities. The arts and culture sector has the opportunity to connect people to objects, places, people and ideas that improve our quality of life and broaden our outlook of the society we live in and operate.

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