



get handsy

SEASONED DOOMSCROLLER GEORGIA CASEY IS FINDING WAYS TO KEEP HER DIGITS BUSY – AND AWAY FROM THE SCREEN.

I don't need to tell you that the news is bad right now. I open my phone each day in the Sisyphean hope of finding a new take on the Sabrina Carpenter discourse, but instead, the news cycle keeps rolling down that hill and squashing my remaining serotonin receptors in the process.

If you are also partial to doomscrolling – the act of repeatedly scrolling through negative news on your device – you won't be surprised to hear that it is having adverse effects on your mental health. Doomscrolling highlights the dangers of our world and issues related to our quality of life, which our mammalian brains are hardwired to prioritise. As a result, we're driven to seek it out excessively, prompting feelings of stress and insecurity.

So what's the solution? Getting handsy, according to Dr Reza Shabahang, a media psychology researcher at Flinders University. "Hands-on hobbies can help individuals cope with and regulate the burdens arising from physical challenges like chronic illness or psychological struggles like depression or grief," he says. "Such activities can foster peace of mind, confidence and a sense of connection."

This line of thinking also explains why fidget toys are so popular – especially with neurodivergent folks. Activities that require sensory input from our hands can stimulate the prefrontal cortex (the area of the brain associated with cognitive and social functioning), which helps to manage anxiety and improve focus. So, if you would be so kind as to relinquish five minutes of scrolling time, let's look at some fun stuff you can do with your hands that won't trigger your fight or flight response.

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PICK UP THE PAINTBRUSH The impetus for this article was the paint-by-numbers kit I excavated from my cupboard after a year of collecting dust. Once I started painting, I was amazed by how quickly time passed and the calm I felt at the end of the session. Dr Frederic Kiernan, a research fellow at the University of Melbourne whose work examines the relationship between music, creativity and emotional wellbeing, says there's an explanation for this. "Many creative activities, like painting, can stimulate cognitive and emotional processes by directing attention away from irritants that may be causing distress, and towards an imaginative space which demands problem-solving, like figuring out which colours do and do not belong next to each other," he says.

FLIP THROUGH SOME PAGES Have you ever started reading a book and become so engrossed in the story that you lose all sense of time and space? That's what boffins like Dr Kiernan call a 'flow state'. "Flow refers to the holistic sensation we feel when we act with total involvement in something," he says. "It is considered an optimal state of consciousness, partly because it is closely related to creativity and helps people feel and perform their best." Another plus for picking up a book: neurological research has found that processing language through reading can stimulate brain pathways and improve memory function. It even has the potential to create new neural pathways!

TWIRL SOME YARN The repetitive nature of knitting and crocheting is believed to have a calming effect on people who are generally anxious or are experiencing periods of heightened stress. Stitchlinks – an organisation that researches the therapeutic benefits of knitting in clinical and community environments – conducted a survey that received over 3,500 responses from 31 countries. The study found that participants felt calmer, happier and noted increased cognitive function the

more they knitted. So the next time you have the urge to fall down a TikTok rabbit hole, maybe pop on your favourite album or comfort show in the background and pick up the knitting needles instead. The added bonus is you might end up with a new scarf.

LEARN A TUNE The psychological benefits of playing instruments are well documented. Dr Kiernan says it all comes down to rhythm. "The rhythmic component of playing music can superimpose a parallel sense of time onto our current reality, which can sync our internal physiological rhythms, like our breathing and heart rate, with these external rhythms." Syncing our brain to the tempo of the music taps into our nervous system, helping to improve focus and reduce stress and anxiety. If you're unsure where to start, several public libraries have instrument collections available to borrow. You can also jump online to access a wide variety of free music lessons and sheet music – your neighbours may not love you to begin with, but your brain sure will!

MAKE SOME GRUB I'm sure the idea of cooking doesn't scream "stress-free" to some of you, but stick with me. Cooking and baking engage multiple senses – touch, smell and taste – which can stimulate the areas of the brain associated with memory, emotional regulation and motor coordination. "While cooking, individuals often experience sensory stimulations, states of flow and moments of mental rest – all of which may help to reduce stress and promote emotional balance," Dr Shabahang says. He also notes the satisfaction we can glean from doing something with a meaningful (and hopefully edible) outcome. "Hands-on activities typically result in the production of something tangible, like a prepared meal, which has the potential to foster a sense of purpose and accomplishment, further enhancing wellbeing." Even if it's a packet cake mix from the supermarket, making something delicious for yourself will do more for your mood than watching Addison Rae fancams ever could. ❀