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Creativity for Wellbeing

Hannah Day discusses why the arts are the new lifestyle supplement

Over 60% of patients on the mental health support waiting list report to crises or emergency services before getting the help they need. This shocking stat has led doctors and community groups to find vital and effective alternatives.

However, these alternative approaches are not just useful for those experiencing chronic mental health issues, but for all of us as a route to a more balanced and healthy lifestyle. Often referred to as 'social prescribing', arts and health initiatives offer improved outcomes, sometimes with and sometimes without the support of medication alongside.

With its early success, arts and health is becoming a buzz term, and is an approach to improved wellbeing that more of us are turning to.

Sussex NHS supports around 535,000 patients, and last summer it took a quite unusual step. A selection of people under their care who suffered from chronic mental

health issues found themselves on a DJing masterclass with Fatboy Slim. What set this project apart from others was not just the fame of the teacher, but the fact that this approach to arts and health was being targeted at individuals who presented at the more severe end of the mental health spectrum.

The level of data we now have showing that arts engagement improves mental health is overwhelming. If you have a creative pursuit, you will know instinctively that making art or engaging with cultural events, put simply, makes you feel better. The Cultural Learning Alliance's report, *ImagineNation*, collected data from various sources to evidence this benefit. Among its many findings, the report states: "People who take part in the arts are 38% more likely to report good health."*

It is this statistical benefit that led Sussex NHS to get the decks out as part of their *Make Your Mark* programme, which is devoted to using the arts to improve health outcomes.

Much of this shift is down to Dr Laura

Marshall-Andrews who, through her Brighton-based GP practice, started offering painting, creative writing and photography lessons in a bid to tackle the root of many mental health issues. Rather than going directly for medication (which certainly has a role to play for many), she wanted to use the programme to tackle isolation and loneliness, a sense of disconnection from others and feelings of uselessness, by offering participants connections and skills. The radical changes that can occur have contributed to the NHS's decision to commit to a social prescribing infrastructure across the UK.

The arts activities Dr Marshall-Andrews offers are mainly delivered through group sessions, but for those whom this doesn't suit, there are alternatives.

Art Therapeutics, or ArtT, is a community interest company led by Dr Peter Day, which offers support online via one-to-one tutorials. Participants are guided through self-devised projects. An individual's needs, interests and

desired health outcomes are considered so that the service can be tailored to match them.

Through these one-to-one projects, ArtT aims to enable and support conversations about wellbeing and health, in particular mental health, specifically around loss, grief or trauma. No previous experience is required, just an openness to using art as a method to create approaches to managing life.

Day describes his support as, "An art project, personally designed, through which anyone can begin to talk, think, and realign aspects of their life." If you have suffered a loss, are grieving, or you have experienced something traumatic or life-changing, working through an art project allows for reflection and insight than can be so easily lost when in the midst of events.

He goes on: "There are obvious positive impacts of arts and health projects in meeting individual health and wellbeing needs." His support is focused on the whole person, and uses effective and proven methods of open dialogue and personal support that include feelings, as opposed to purely medical treatments. It is this tailored, personal and supported approach that can add so much to the arts projects themselves. Allowing people the space and time to process and explore, in a confidential and non-judgemental space, is leading to exciting outcomes. ArtT aims to contribute to the ongoing positive studies around the use of arts in healthcare and wellbeing through its success stories and testimonies.

As well as provision through the NHS and CICs such as ArtT, community-focused groups are also adding to the availability of arts and health programmes. Clare Bear who runs the Shrewsbury-based not-for-profit social enterprise LovelyLand has effectively used creativity to help with her core focus of "exploring meaningful connections with nature and each other". As we talk, the hum of a lawnmower can be heard coming from one of the community gardens she has set up, and she talks eagerly of another that will open soon.

While nature is at the centre of all LovelyLand's projects, creativity as a route into connecting with our open spaces plays a central role. From using nature, being inspired by nature, or making in nature, creativity opens up diverse routes into connecting with our environment and with others.

"We particularly aim at working with those who face barriers when it comes to accessing nature, community and support. It could be health, income, confidence or social isolation," Clare says.

Art offers an inclusive way to connect with a process that leads to quality outcomes, guided by practising artists. Quality is mentioned again and again. Each project, while supporting those who attend, also supports the artists who lead, with Clare stating how important it is that the art is not an add-on and is led by skilled creatives who are paid a fair wage.

Her projects are varied, with a large event each spring when LovelyLand connects with the Shrewsbury Arts Trail. Last year, over 50 people attended a workshop, and this year, Clare will be working with over 200 participants, each contributing a five-inch textile square, which will be pieced together to create one large artwork. People of different ages, skills and abilities will be involved. The project began with participants visiting the National Trust's Attingham Park, somewhere they might usually find accessing difficult due to transport and cost. The trip allowed people to be immersed in nature, to be inspired by it, and then use it to create their textile square. Each stage of the project links to the one before and the one after. The sessions are not quick drop-ins, but carefully planned and considered journeys through nature and art, leading to something the participants can be deeply proud of.

With an ever-growing number of inspiring people and projects supporting a more holistic approach to health, arts engagement, once an outlier, is rapidly becoming central in how we treat and support ourselves. For many, this is welcome, and long overdue. ●

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Reference

* Cultural Learning Alliance, ImagineNation: The Value of Cultural Learning (2017), available from culturallearningalliance.org.uk

Further reading

makeyourmarknhs.org
headsoncharity.org
arttherapeutics.co.uk
lovelyland.co.uk

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