

The surprising hobby that can extend your life by 10 years

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With cutting-edge research pointing to art's vital role in brain health, here's how to harness the effects for yourself

By [Eleanor Mills](#) 30 March 2023 • 3:11pm



According to a leading neurologist, daily artistic practice of any kind can have huge health benefits

We all know that for optimal physical health we should eat at least five different fruits and vegetables a day (in fact the latest research suggests consuming 30 different types a week). But did you know that just by engaging with art you can extend your life by 10 years?

According to a leading neurologist, daily artistic practice of any kind – you don't have to be any good, it's the doing that matters – can have huge benefits in terms of lowering stress levels, minimising physical and mental-health issues and help us continue to learn, even in later life.

Professor Susan Magsamen is executive director of the International Arts + Minds Laboratory, Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Her new book, [Your Brain on Art](#), written in conjunction with Ivy Ross, Google's vice president of hardware design, has pulled together multiple studies to make a compelling case for art's vital role in brain health.

"The evidence is here," says Prof Magsamen. "Mask-making helps soldiers recover more quickly from PTSD, and a cancer hospital designed to increase and augment sensory experiences helps patients heal faster."

In the book, Magsamen draws on cutting-edge research to show that engaging in 45 minutes of any kind of art – from colouring to dancing or playing music – reduces cortisol (the stress chemical) and can help us live happier, healthier lives.



Professor Susan Magsamen (left) and Ivy Ross (right)
Credit: Ben Krantz

Her area of study is neuroaesthetics or neuroarts – the study of how art affects the brain. She tells the story of a man with Alzheimer's who after listening to a playlist of songs he used to love, recognises his son for the first time in 10 years.

"The music triggers multiple brain pathways stimulating the auditory cortex (which processes sound), the amygdala (the seat of emotion) and the hippocampus (memory)," she says. "When we listen to nostalgic music it activates the hippocampus, but importantly, other areas of the brain, which also link to memory and recall that have not been damaged."

Engaging in 45 minutes of any kind of art can help us live happier, healthier lives, says Prof Magsamen



Picture Credit: Lucy Zhou

According to Magsamen, the more we understand how the arts work physically and physiologically, the more we can learn to use them effectively in our own lives. “The more salient – ie emotionally powerful – something is, the better we learn and remember it,” she says.

So how best can we harness these effects for ourselves? The authors share their advice:

Aim for at least 30-45 minutes of some kind of artistic activity every day

People who engage in the arts ideally every day, but at least every week, are found to have lower mental distress, better mental functioning and improved quality of life.

Hum, and/or sing

Both of these activate the vagus nerve, engaging the parasympathetic systems to make you feel calm and more optimistic. Singing has been proved to help dementia patients reconnect to family and friends because it activates different pathways to memories in the brain.

Curate a personal playlist

Songs associated with happy memories release anxiety and boost mood, (or “personalised microdosing of aesthetics” as it’s now called in California). Sound vibration has the capacity to take the body out of a fight-flight-freeze reaction and is an excellent tool for stress because it works on an unconscious level, literally changing the vibrations in your body.”

Read a poem that you love

This lights up some of the same parts of the brain as listening to music, stimulating the brain’s primary reward circuitry

Get out the clay or Play-Doh

Working with clay is the only art form where both of your hands have the same level of dexterity. Studies have shown the psychological benefits of being able to make something in clay, break it down and start again. The tactile quality of clay work reduces negative mood and anxiety and also helps focus. Working with clay releases serotonin, effortlessly lifting your spirits and increasing and optimistic outlook

Create a knitting circle

Sitting with others while you knit or sew, results in stronger social connections, helps maintain focus and reduce anxiety and manage stress.

Do some colouring

Remember that fad for adult colouring books? Turns out they were on to something. Half an hour of colouring stimulates the same deep parts of the brain as meditation and might be easier to focus on

Smell something you love

Smell informs as much as 75 per cent of your emotions. Lying in a hot bath scented with lavender or another scent you love, or that has good connotations for you, is massively effective for lifting or changing mood

Immerse yourself in an interactive exhibit

These dissolve the boundaries between art and viewer, engaging all of our senses and creating strong emotional reactions that heighten learning and memory.

‘Your Brain on Art’ by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross is published by Canongate.

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