



The Art of Creating Positive Change

The arts have long been used to aid in healing, provide a means of expression, nurture academic growth, and build strong, cohesive communities.

COMPAS, a well-established arts education nonprofit in Minnesota, understands the innate need for interaction with the arts and culture, and provides myriad artistic opportunities to help bridge gaps, restore a sense of connection, and help people cope with the trauma experienced worldwide in recent years.

INTRODUCTION

Leveraging creativity for good in a challenging world

The negative consequences of the last several years have been laid bare as we transition from the COVID-19 pandemic to living with the virus as an endemic concern. **We're learning to live in a new reality where divides must be bridged and connections restored.**

Children especially have been impacted by isolation on several fronts: mental wellness, academic readiness, and social inclusion. But people of all ages have endured traumas on a global scale — before and beyond the pandemic — including war, climate change, racism, sexism, and more. Not only do we continue to experience the lasting impacts of the pandemic within the healthcare landscape, but within the social landscape as well.



Today, when chasms and setbacks seem almost overwhelming, scientific research proves that creative opportunities aren't optional; they're necessary. COMPAS and other such arts education nonprofits offer a distinct advantage and opportunity to bring meaningful creative interactions to key stakeholder groups.

Moreover, these arts experiences help fulfill critical objectives:

improving mental wellness, enhancing academic performance, driving positive community outcomes and connections, and influencing social progress.

With that in mind, this white paper approaches the topic from four perspectives: the **Arts and Well-Being**, the **Arts and Academic Benefits**, the **Arts and Community**, and the **Arts and Social Progress**.

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WE ARE ALL BORN *creative*
BUT WE MUST WORK TO STAY THAT WAY.  WHEN WE INVEST IN PRESERVING THIS PART OF OUR MINDS, WE HOLD ON TO A PIECE OF OURSELVES THAT MAKES US BETTER SUITED TO NOT ONLY SURVIVE IN THIS WORLD, BUT **THRIVE.**

OUR CREATIVITY *is precious*  WE CAN'T SQUANDER IT. WE CAN'T DEFUND IT. WE CAN'T LET IT BECOME EXTRACURRICULAR. BECAUSE IT'S NOT. 

IT IS ESSENTIAL *it's* ELEMENTAL HEALING, TEACHING LIFE-GIVING 

The Arts and Well-Being



Well-being is more than the absence of illness. It encompasses a sense of purpose or meaning in life. It's taking pride in ourselves and being able to express who we truly are. It's creating meaningful connections with others. And it's being buoyed by all of these things and, thus, believing in a positive future.

In this section, we focus on physical and mental well-being, and how **creative experiences and expression can help people attain greater health and happiness.**



Everyone can benefit from the arts

Not long ago, a fifth grader who'd been struggling moved to a new school. There, she blossomed, thanks in large part to Alanna Morris, a COMPAS Teaching Artist and Juilliard-trained dancer and choreographer. Morris led the kids in social dance, getting the kids moving and grooving. Soon this student joined the rest of her classmates — talking, laughing, and getting creative.

“My passion for education is centered in the belief that an essential part of learning is finding a way of learning that works for you,” says Morris. “Considering the host of challenges we can face in education, I’m an advocate for the power of artful habits to enhance our self-development.”

Research shows that involvement with the arts in any of its forms can have a meaningful and measurable effect on improving the lives of individuals and shaping the communities in which they live. In a 2017 study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, low- to moderate-income residents of New York City neighborhoods with many cultural resources were found to be healthier, better educated, and safer overall than those in similar communities with fewer creative resources.¹

Cultural resources were significantly linked to

↓ **5%**
decrease in obesity

↓ **14%**
decrease in cases of child abuse and neglect

↓ **18%**
reduction in serious crime rate

↑ **18%**
increase in kids scoring in top stratum on English-language arts and math exams

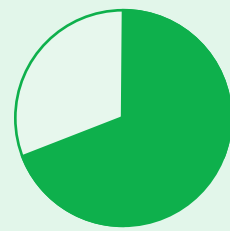


“The findings of this study prove what we’ve witnessed anecdotally for decades: The arts improve lives,” said James Bartlett, former executive director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts.²

Creativity: American as apple pie

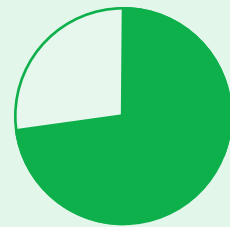
To gauge perceptions and attitudes about the arts in America, Ipsos Public Affairs conducted a poll of 3,023 adults for “Americans Speak Out About the Arts” (2018)—the second in a series of national opinion surveys. Results found that “Americans are highly engaged in the arts and believe more strongly than ever that creative immersion promotes personal well-being, helps us understand other cultures in our community, is essential to a well-rounded K–12 education, and that government has an important role in funding the arts.”

The survey revealed that a significant majority of those polled say the arts improve well-being and provide meaning for their lives, specifically:



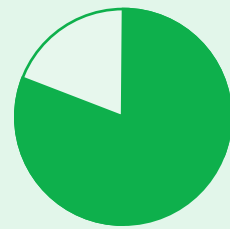
69%

said the arts “*lift me up beyond everyday experiences*”



73%

said the arts give them “*pure pleasure to experience and participate in*”



81%

said the arts are a “*positive experience in a troubled world*”



The survey also found an improvement in health and wellness:



68%

said that “*the arts improve healing and the healthcare experience*”



76%

of those surveyed who engage in the arts said “*the arts have a positive impact on their overall health and well-being*”



Americans care about the arts and recognize their value. No wonder they permeate so much of our lives—and support our well-being.

Healing the wounds of war

Art therapy invites artistic self-expression to improve mental health and well-being, and it's frequently used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), often found among members of the military.

According to Creative Forces, a national military arts program, **85% of patients** at Walter Reed National Medical Center **said “art therapy was helpful to their healing.”** Creative Forces estimates that using art therapy as a treatment for PTSD could reduce healthcare costs by more than \$1,000 per veteran—that's a savings of \$1.7 billion.”³



Nearly 80 years of arts therapy

The arts have been making a real difference to military service members since World War II when shell-shocked (an older term for PTSD) soldiers were first invited to paint, draw, sculpt, and more “to help process what they’d witnessed and experienced at war.”⁴



“The arts heal the mental, physical, and moral injuries of war for military service members,” writes Randy Cohen in Artsblog, a blog for arts professionals hosted by Americans for the Arts. “Veterans rank creative arts therapies in the top four (out of 40) interventions and treatments. Across the military continuum, the arts promote resilience during predeployment and deployment, and then with reintegration of military service members, veterans, families, and caregivers back into their communities.”⁵

It’s not just soldiers who are impacted by war—and helped by art therapy.

Since the beginning of the intensified conflict of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, children across Ukraine have been introduced to art therapy. Earlier this year, artwork by Ukrainian children was displayed as part of a “Children of War” exhibit at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art in Chicago. The exhibit was brought to the museum by Nataliia and Yustyna Pavliuk, a Ukrainian mother and daughter who’ve introduced art therapy to children across their country.



One featured painting was created in Lviv by Veronika, age 10. She painted herself standing with a friend in front of a home she “imagined could house all of her friends who’d died in the war.” During Russian shelling, Veronika lost a finger and vision in one eye, and her family was killed.

“It’s hard not to start crying when you work with [these children],” said Yustyna, “but they continue living.”⁶

And the continuing work of the Pavliuks and other art therapists might be critical: Research shows **nonverbal therapeutic practices, including art therapy, may promote healing for those affected by war**, according to a National Library of Medicine report on using art therapy with traumatized refugee children and youth.⁷

Helping create sound minds

Today it's widely understood and appreciated that engaging in artistic and cultural experiences can play a valuable role in helping those who have mental health issues. In fact, during the pandemic, which increased depression and anxiety by 25%, according to the World Health Organization, many people participated in various forms of arts-related therapies—even if they didn't realize that's what they were doing.



Many readers, for example, turned to poetry and fiction both for comfort and escape—a practice that “may have a positive impact on patients who have symptoms of anxiety or depression, or who experience difficulty coping with a cancer diagnosis,” according to Allan Peterkin, director of the Narrative-Based Medicine Lab at the University of Toronto.⁸

But bibliotherapy isn't new—in fact, it started among “sick, injured, and traumatized soldiers,” during World War I. Much more recently, many doctors, including American poet and physician Rafael Campo and clinical neurologist Donald Weaver, started writing poetry prescriptions for patients. And the National Association of Poetry Therapy is a long-established organization that offers how-to books, conferences, and more.

Meanwhile, children have worked successfully with in-school art and music therapists to deal with social and emotional difficulties, behavioral disorders, ADHD, low self-esteem, mental health challenges, and other issues.



COMPAS teaching artist Stefon “Bionik” Taylor, a McKnight Composer Fellow, mentored teen musicians to build a safe community and challenged them to use their life experiences for creative inspiration. Eventually, the group members collaboratively produced “In My Head,” a song about mental health.⁹

Adults other than soldiers can also find healing for their traumas through artistic endeavors. Therapists bring art to seniors with dementia, patients with eating disorders, prisoners looking for more meaning, and many other groups experiencing mental health challenges.

“Because art therapy can be particularly helpful when folks don't have the words to describe their experience or challenges, it's ideally suited for improving mental health and well-being in the wake of the pandemic.”¹⁰



Just 20 minutes of arts activity can help you live longer.



It's true. Research shows that participating in the arts—whether it's **painting, writing a poem, knitting a hat, or some other activity—can lower stress, improve mood, help us cope with our emotions, and even create stronger communities**, says Susan Magsamen, founder and executive

director of the International Arts + Mind Lab at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine's Pedersen Brain Science Institute and coauthor of *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*.



Patients may initially be hesitant to engage, thinking they need to be an artist to participate. But art therapy isn't about becoming the next Pablo Picasso or Beyoncé (even if that would be awesome).

It's about using the process of creating art to acknowledge and recognize feelings that one may not have been able to put into words.

In a May 2020 coronavirus impact report by the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), therapists pointed out that individuals were simply tired of discussing the pandemic and, because of all-day online meetings, weary of talking altogether. During art therapy, no one need say a word if they don't want to while working through their emotions. As one therapist noted in the survey, many clients "welcome expressing themselves using art materials, giving their brains a new task and their mouths a break."¹¹

*"When we limit ourselves to just words, we're losing a significant part of our lived experiences," says Girija Kaimal, an art therapist at Drexel University in Philadelphia and president of the AATA. "Some people can put their feelings into words beautifully, but most of us cannot. To have additional expressive forms is really just allowing the whole person to present themselves."*¹²



Ongoing research suggests that associating with creative expression—either as a spectator or participant—may also improve the health, well-being, and independence of older adults. According to the National Institute on Aging, *"research on music, theater, dance, creative writing, and other participatory arts shows promise for improving older adults' quality of life and well-being, from better cognitive function, memory, and self-esteem to reduced stress and increased social interaction."*¹³



Creating well-being with COMPAS

For nearly 50 years, COMPAS and its professional teaching artists have helped improve the well-being of millions of Minnesotans of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities through participatory creativity in storytelling, dance, music, painting, and other expressive forms.

When students engage in creative experiences, they do better in school and life. COMPAS partners with teachers and schools to spark imagination and teach creativity in ways that enrich curriculum, engage learners, and help develop whole, problem-solving, creative minds.

For those in hospitals, mental health facilities and other institutions, COMPAS programs help reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood, and boost self-esteem. Artistic endeavors also promote social interaction and improve communication skills by enabling residents to express themselves creatively while connecting with others in a meaningful way.



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