

A Brief Walk Through Time®
The Art of Well-being
by
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I recently had a chance to travel to Amsterdam and took the opportunity to visit the Van Gogh Museum to learn more about one of my favourite artists. It is well known that Vincent Van Gogh (30 March 1853 – 29 July 1890) suffered most of his adult life with a myriad of physical and mental health conditions such as insomnia, epilepsy, depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety and Ménière's disease (a disorder of the inner ear that is characterized by episodes of vertigo, tinnitus and hearing loss). He sought help with these conditions from local doctors in Arles, France, where he was living at the time, and in May of 1889 admitted himself to the Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy de Provence, France. It was during his yearlong stay at this facility that Vincent used creativity and his artistic abilities not only as therapy but as an attempt to manage his health conditions and improve his overall well-being. He used the asylum grounds and gardens to create what some consider to be his best work.

In the early 1970s the staff of the Leavesden Hospital created many therapeutic arts related opportunities such as: painting, drawing, crafts, music and drama, for residents to use as part of their own therapies. The Occupational Therapy Department, managed by Monica Diplock, saw residents creating their own items such as: teddy bears, foot stools, brass candlestick holders' and various other items which they could then offer for sale at the annual fairs. Something that the residents and staff all look forward to.

The idea that all forms of creativity (the arts) play a valuable and vital role in helping people maintain their mental well-being came into its own in the late 1990s with a programme titled "Arts on Prescription" which recognized that engagement in the arts can alleviate anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness and that the arts can be an effective mental medication for their treatment. Elaine Johnson, Community Arts Development Officer, coordinates the Arts on Prescription, Artistsmeet and the Picture This - Photography Walks schemes for Three Rivers District Council agrees with the benefits of these programmes *"Our creative activities are always popular with people of all ages and families too. There is so much data-based evidence out there to show how taking part in a cultural activity can boost well-being and the pandemic has brought this to our attention with so many more people turning to the creative arts for sanctuary"*.

Recognizing, promoting and supporting the use of the arts for well-being can be found not only in our local communities, but nationally as well. Dean Russell, MP for Watford, is not only a noted artist himself, but is Chair of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art and serves on the Health and Social Care Committee. Dean knows the importance of taking time away from the daily grind of life and the benefit to the bottom line of everyone's well-being *"I think it is very important that everybody takes time for themselves away from any screens, and painting can serve as a welcome distraction. When I am working on a piece of art, it allows me to forget a lot of what is happening in the background, even if just for a short period of time."* I am also committed to supporting the Government's Music and the Arts in Healthcare programme. Government data on arts participation rates in England estimates that the total annual NHS cost savings due to reductions in GP visits is more than £168 million.