

Lifestyle/ Health & Wellness

How creative activities are good for mental health and reduce stress

Creative expression through pursuits such as painting, knitting or cooking can act like a natural antidepressant, boosting happiness and confidence

Don't worry if you're not a 'right brainer'. Just do something that interests you and don't judge your performance.



Sasha Gonzales

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Diane Ng, a freelance graphic designer and illustrator, says creative activities like watercolour painting, sketching, food styling, photography, making furniture and even doodling make her feel euphoric.

“When I get to work on an artistic project, whether it’s a personal or a professional one, I am transported to a happy place in my mind, where I feel settled and focused,” says the 33-year-old, who lives and works in Singapore. “The deeper I get into the task, the more introspective it becomes – I want to explore my inner self more and my thoughts start to flow in a way that feels almost cathartic. To me, creative expression is therapy.”

Angel Yip, who lives in Hong Kong, has a similar take on her favourite creative activity: sewing. “The late, great Hollywood costume designer Edith Head once said, ‘If everybody sews, there’s no need for therapy,’ and I believe that,” says Yip, an insurance agent in her 40s. “Sewing my own clothes makes me feel really good, not only because the process relaxes me and keeps me focused, but by the end of it I’m left with a beautiful piece of work that I’m proud of.

“It’s also satisfying trying to solve the challenges that sometimes happen along the way. Plus, there’s always something new to learn, so to me, every sewing project is an opportunity to grow.”



Diane Ng says her mind is transported to a happy place when she is working on an artistic project. Photo: Diane Ng

Creativity boosts our emotional health and well-being in several different ways, says Nivedita Raj Ramanujam, a psychotherapist and hypnotherapist at Hong Kong-based psychotherapy practice Inner Compass.

“Creative expression boosts our confidence, focuses our minds and acts like a natural antidepressant, helping to reduce anxiety,” she says. “The act of being creative also engages multiple skills, types of intelligence, inner resources, and conscious and unconscious energies to bring forth something that is uniquely your creation. Creativity is therefore empowering and enlivening on many levels.”



Nivedita Raj Ramanujam.

When people are doing something creative, they can enter a state of “flow” where they’re completely absorbed by the activity and lose all track of time, she says. In this state they can feel pleasure, fun, fulfilment or even surprise. Ramanujam says that if the creative process is directed towards a positive and wholesome end, this state of creative flow can have a positive impact on one’s emotions.

Over the years, many studies have explored the link between creativity and mental health.

One small study published in 2016 in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, for example, found that the more time people spent on creative exercises during the day, the more they experienced positive moods like joy, alertness and interest. Another study, published in 2013 in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, looked at 3,500 knitters around the world and discovered a significant relationship between knitting frequency and feelings of calm and happiness.



One of Ng's watercolour paintings. Photo: Diane Ng



One of Ng's digital doodles. Photo: Diane Ng

Activities like art, music, drama and dance are sometimes also used by mental health practitioners to help patients deal with stress, depression, grief and trauma. Creative expression can function as an outlet for patients' emotions, helps them get in touch with their feelings, provides a positive distraction, improves their problem-solving and communication skills, fosters self-awareness, helps with self-management and builds a sense of self-worth.

A study published last year in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* found that new mothers who were part of singing and music groups recovered from postnatal depression symptoms faster than those in control groups. A review, also published last year, in the journal *Perspectives in Public Health* found that participation in arts activities and clinical arts therapy could be beneficial for people with mental and physical health problems. The reviewers, who analysed 20 studies, suggested that such activities be made more widely available in health and social settings.



As you progress through the project or hobby, you'll find yourself getting 'lost' in it and it will start to feel enjoyable and even natural

Diane Ng

It is wrong to assume that you need to be artistic or a right-brain thinker to be creative. Even if you have never attempted anything creative in your life, it is never too late to start. Ramanujam suggests taking up an activity that interests you but not to judge your performance or the outcome. Instead, focus on the fun aspect of the activity and be curious about the steps or processes involved.

Yip believes that everybody is creative in some way; the trick is to experiment with different activities to find out what feels most fulfilling or rewarding. She says it is also important to be interested in the activity so that you can fully engage with it.

As creativity takes time to hone, Yip says you should try to commit to whatever activity you've chosen. "The more you do and the more you learn, the better you will get at it over time," she says. "I learnt how to sew in secondary school, picked it up again in 2006, and have only been doing it regularly since 2012."



Yip says it is important to be interested in an activity to fully engage in it. Photo: Edmond So

Ng says people often complain to her that they're not creative, but little do they realise that some of the things they do every day, like cooking or writing in their journals, can be considered creative.

If you're thinking of taking up a creative activity as a hobby but aren't sure where to begin, Ng recommends asking yourself what you've always wanted to make from scratch. Then, at least, the interest to start and the motivation to finish are higher.

"As you progress through the project or hobby, you'll find yourself getting 'lost' in it and it will start to feel enjoyable and even natural," she says. "Believe it or not, I sometimes struggle when I draw, but I just keep at it until I find myself back in that creative flow.

"I think we're all capable of doing something creative and building our creative capacity, so my suggestion is to try something and see how it makes you feel. The only way to tell if you're going to enjoy or be good at a creative activity is to start it."