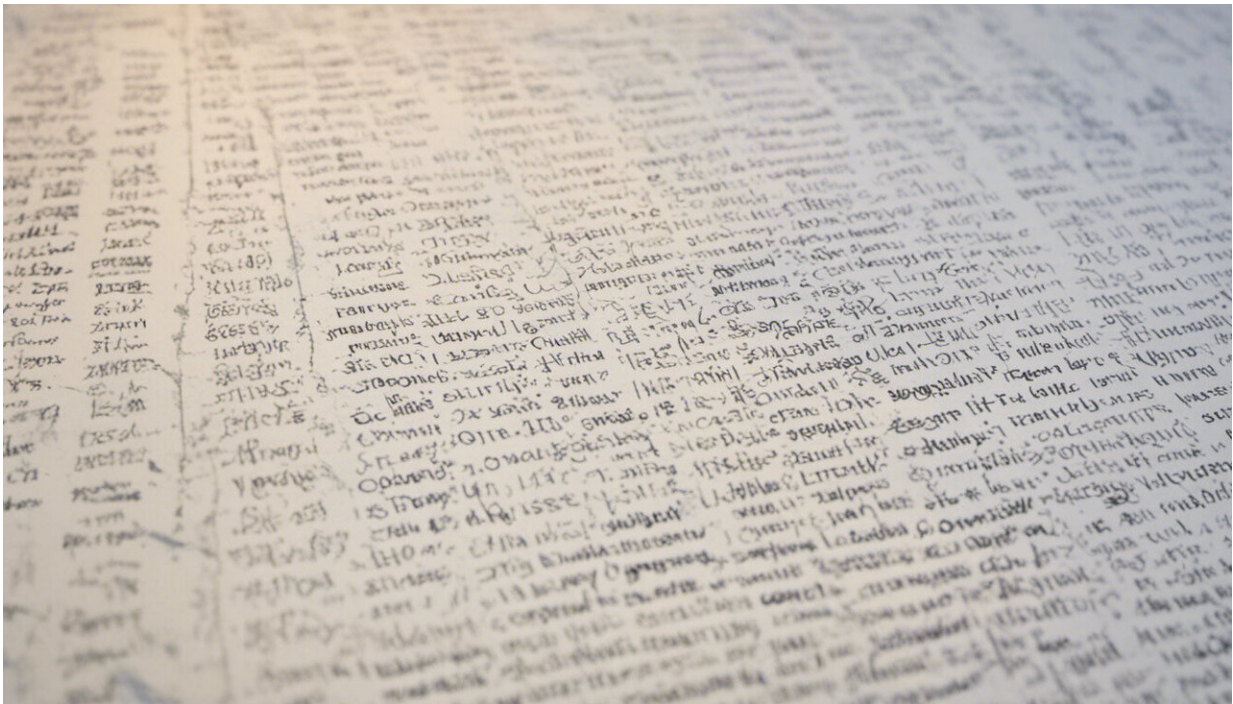


How prescription creativity can improve mental and physical health

April 5 2018, by Hilary Bungay



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The idea of arts on prescription and social prescribing may seem like a new one, but it is actually more than 10 years since UK government policy first referenced [linking patients with non-medical support](#) in the community.

In the past couple of years, however, calls for the arts to be a core component of social prescribing in the UK have been growing. A [recent report by Arts Council Wales](#), for example, has backed the idea. And, last summer, [recommendations](#) were put forward by an all-party parliamentary group for clinical commissioning groups, NHS trusts and local authorities to incorporate arts on prescription into their commissioning plans and redesign care pathways where appropriate.

At present there are a number of arts on prescription programmes operating around the UK – encompassing all kinds of human creativity including seated dance, creative writing, forum theatre and object handling in museums. There is a growing body of evidence which shows that different arts being prescribed have a positive impact on a variety of health conditions. One [recent review](#), for instance, reported ten key benefits for those involved in these kinds of schemes. They included self esteem and confidence boosts, physical health improvements, better social connections and the acquisition of new skills.

But why the arts? Social prescribing aims to address the social causes of ill health and give people the support they need – such as advice about benefits, employment and housing. It can also include access to exercise, volunteering, and arts and creative activities. So it may seem like an advice system might be just as useful – but actually prescribing specific arts activities can have some unique benefits.

Mental health and wellbeing

There is growing evidence that several different types of arts schemes are not only cost effective, [but can improve wellbeing](#) and have a positive impact on levels of anxiety and depression.

Take singing, for example. Research has demonstrated that it can have a positive impact on [mental health](#) and wellbeing. In fact, several studies

undertaken with older people have found that community singing appears to [have a significant effect](#) on their quality of life – helping ameliorate the effects of anxiety and depression. In addition, findings [from a recently published study](#) have demonstrated that new mothers taking part in singing and music groups experience a faster reduction in post-natal depression symptoms than those in control groups.

As we age, we are at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation through loss of social networks, as well as facing new limitations as a result of decreasing physical health. The arts can create social connections – and [research has shown](#) that participation in arts programmes enables [older people](#) to get in touch with others and extend existing networks of support in their communities, helping to alleviate loneliness and isolation.

Our ongoing project, "Creative Journeys", is [looking at ways](#) that the arts can help build social relationships in residential care homes. The study is due to finish in October 2018, but early indications are that the arts activities increase social interactions between residents, and between residents and staff with improved mood and wellbeing as a result.

Not only does [evidence suggest](#) participation in the arts may delay the onset of dementia, but also that it can impact on cognitive functioning, through stimulating memories, and attention. In addition, art-making can improve the mood, confidence and social engagement, of people living with dementia, and has been shown to enhance the relationship between the carer and the cared for.

Long-term conditions

Arts activities are [also effective](#) alongside treatment of a number of long-term conditions. Music, singing and visual arts can all improve confidence and the quality of life of people with stroke, for example.

People living with Parkinson's disease who take part in group singing and dance experience improvements in their voice and movements too.

In addition, the British Lung Foundation supports singing groups for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) – and [research has indicated](#) that there are improvements in lung function and quality of life for people who join "singing for breathing" groups.

Whether it is traditional art lessons, joining a community singing group, or any other creative activity, the evidence is clear: participating in these activities has a positive impact on health and wellbeing.

Putting arts on social prescriptions is a start, but we do still need to look at the relative strengths and cost effectiveness of implementing them across the UK. Only then can we truly start to develop proper treatment programmes for different conditions.

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