

# Your pandemic hobby might be doing more good than you know

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Ariel Skelley/DigitalVision, Getty Images

Maybe it was the meme that pointed out how Shakespeare used his time

in quarantine to write "King Lear." Maybe it was all those photos of sourdough bread in your social media feed. Maybe you're just bored.

Whatever the spark—you're ready to take on a hobby.

Good idea, experts say.

"The process of being creative does a whole bunch of really good things for us," physically and mentally, said James C. Kaufman, professor of educational psychology at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

Kaufman, who has written extensively about creativity, said there are many reasons why a stimulating hobby can help us. The first is pretty simple: It's fun.

That's mentally healthy, Kaufman said, because when we're focused on such an [activity](#), "we're not thinking about any negative thoughts or fears or worries."

At its best, a creative activity such as drawing or playing music can put you in a state of "flow," where you're intensely caught up in what you're doing. "This is not shockingly different from what they call runner's high, or what mountain climbers say they feel."

Some activities, such as writing with an emphasis on a narrative, as in a journal or blog, can lower harmful stress by helping us organize our thinking, he said. "It helps put all these different thoughts, as if they were loose clothing, onto coat hangers. And it frees up space in our brain."

That's not the only way hobbies can help us, researchers say. A 2015 study in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* found that engaging in

[leisure activities](#) improved mood and stress levels and lowered heart rates. In 2017, a small study in *Psychosomatic Medicine* found that pleasant leisure activities lowered the blood pressure of Alzheimer's disease caregivers.

And that's important in the middle of a pandemic, said Jeanine Parisi, an associate scientist in the department of mental health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. "Everything seems a little out of control. Activities are the one thing that could provide structure and give you back a sense of personal control."

Parisi's colleague Michelle Carlson, a professor who leads a Johns Hopkins lab devoted to brain health, said the precise mechanism of what's going on in our brains when we're happily engaged in an activity isn't clear. But some of the effects are.

She led a small study published in 2015 in *Alzheimer's & Dementia* of older adults who volunteered to mentor young students in Baltimore. Compared to the adults not enrolled in the program, the participants saw growth in both the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain related to executive function, behavior and thinking—and to the hippocampus, which is important to memory.

Others' research has found benefits from all kinds of pandemic-safe activities: gardening, spending time outdoors, playing a musical instrument, even knitting. And of course, anything that increases [physical activity](#) is crucial for heart health and also can help with brain health, Carlson said.

Overwhelmed by the options? Carlson and Parisi have done research indicating that mixing things up might actually be a great idea. Women in their study who participated in a greater variety of activities over nearly a decade had a lower risk of impaired memory and other

cognitive problems.

"By doing a variety of activities, you'll expose your brain and body to different things," Parisi said. "If you meditate, that may be good for stress reduction and relaxation. If you do some puzzles or reading or writing, that may be more cognitively stimulating. And, if you take walks, that is more physically engaging. By doing all of these, you're really tapping into the whole brain and body."

Beyond that, Kaufman said, a good hobby is something that lives in the sweet spot of being not so easy that it's not engaging, but not so challenging that you give up quickly.

And if you're doing something creative, remember the benefit doesn't come from the quality of your work, he said. Put another way—we're not all Shakespeare, and most of us will not be producing "King Lear." To expect otherwise adds stress that can negate the benefits of the activity, Kaufman said.

So, don't be afraid to take baby steps, Parisi said. "Even with physical activity, you don't have to go from being a couch potato to running a 5K. All you need to do is take one more step than you did the previous day."

As you do the activity, "you're building confidence, you're making it part of your identity," she said. "It's giving you a sense of control and pride. That feeling of, 'Wow! I did that!'"

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