

HEALTH AND WELLBEING: TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS OF ARTS, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY

Factsheet 4 drawn from ANA's Insight Report, 'Transformative: Impacts of culture and creativity'

Can arts and culture help prevent dementia?

A ground breaking 2003 study of approximately 500 individuals aged 75 and older found that reading, playing board games, playing musical instruments, and dancing were associated with a lower risk of dementia.

Follow up studies since 2003 have supported this finding.

Health and wellbeing: How arts and culture impact physical and mental health outcomes

Arts and culture, when used in both clinical and wellbeing settings, deliver positive health and wellbeing impacts. The relationship between engagement with arts and culture, and benefits to health is indirect but strong – as evidenced by various credible international and national research sources.

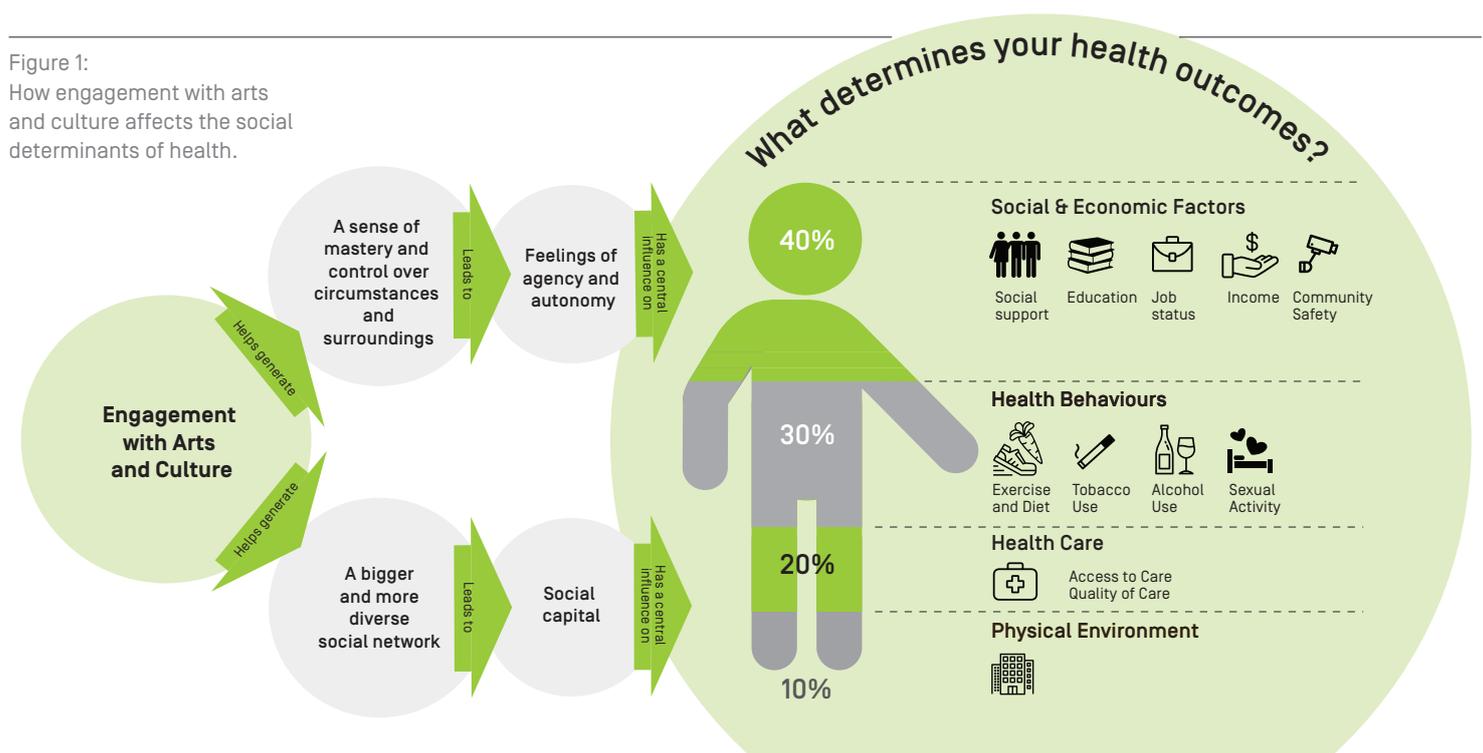
The need to use all available tools in facing Australia's health challenges

Even before Covid-19, Australia was facing numerous significant healthcare concerns, including an aging population, increasing incidence of dementia, and declines in social cohesion – all leading to a range of negative health outcomes.

Australia has strong policies about using arts and culture to influence the social determinants of health – that is, the conditions in which we grow, live, work and age, including how strong our social networks are, lifestyle factors, and psychological states (see Figure 1). However, these policies are often not being systematically implemented.

For all these reasons, it is critical that Australia takes a systematic and strategic approach to developing a strong, rich cultural life that enhances the health and wellbeing of our nation.

Figure 1: How engagement with arts and culture affects the social determinants of health.



In times of crisis, arts and culture are more critical than ever

The world has changed in 2020, and the evidence about the impacts of arts and culture are more relevant than ever. Research shows that, during and following major crises such as health emergencies or natural disasters, effective arts and cultural activities are those that aim to reconnect affected communities, reduce feelings of isolation, strengthen people’s connection to place, provide opportunities for reflection and commemoration, and foster a shared sense of hope and optimism. Arts and cultural activity can also increase a nation’s soft power potential; a critical resource during a period of global disruption.

Why use arts and culture to build a healthier Australia?

Research shows that engagement with arts and cultural activities reduces health risks, particularly for mental health and other risks directly influenced by the existence of social networks, as was shown in Figure 1.

Arts and cultural engagement has been shown to: enhance social inclusion; reduce loneliness; increase confidence; and improve feelings of self-worth. These outcomes, in turn, have a direct and positive impact on both physical and mental health.

In fact, in 2016 Australian researchers produced the first dose-response-style study of arts and mental health, showing that two-hour “doses” of creative activities per week could enhance mental wellbeing in a general population.

Arts and cultural tools have also been successfully used to improve outcomes in terms of both prevention and treatment of physical illnesses and diseases.

Internationally proven strategies for improving health and wellbeing through arts and culture

Arts and cultural tools are already being used in clinical and wellbeing settings across Australia, including in leading hospitals. While the benefits generated can be indirect, they are identifiable and measurable. Examples of successful applications of arts and culture in health and wellbeing environments are shown in Table 1.

Objective	Improve in-patient outcomes	Improve recovery	Reduce dementia risk	Improve elderly quality of life
Strategic investment activity	Invest in arts and creative programs and innovative and creative aesthetics in healthcare settings.	Invest in arts-based interventions designed and delivered to aid recovery from long-term conditions.	Invest in researching arts-based interventions that could be designed and delivered to aid dementia prevention.	Invest in arts-based interventions designed and delivered to build social connections.
Proven outcomes	These activities deliver enhanced patient outcomes across a wide range of measures, particularly within in-patient hospital contexts. For example, innovative and creative design solutions and enhanced interior and exterior landscaping have all been found to enhance positive patient outcomes.	The Australian Defence Force uses arts-based interventions for personnel who have been wounded, injured or become ill during service. These interventions aid recovery, improve self-esteem and improve social functionality. Arts-based interventions have also been used internationally to aid addiction recovery.	Arts-based interventions have been found to reduce the risk of dementia. This finding is critical for the future management of Australia’s aging population. Today, dementia is the second-leading cause of death of Australians. An estimated 459,000 Australians were living with dementia in 2019, and, in 2017, the disease cost Australia \$14 billion.	Arts engagement has been proven to reduce depression and stress and improve feelings of self-worth in the elderly. Further, creatively enhanced interior and exterior landscaping are found to enhance patient experiences in aged care, dementia care, and end-of-life care environments.

Table 1:
Successful health and wellbeing outcomes achieved through strategic arts and culture investment



What do middle Australians think about the role of arts and culture in health and wellbeing?

I don't know if this is relevant, but without [arts and culture], it affects our health department and all the things. I think if you don't have cultural—all those sorts of things—people get mental health issues. All of these things make us happier, which is better for our mental health. Without those things, there is a lot more strain on services like that. (Female, Brisbane)

[Arts and culture] can be a point of discussion. In the family, you might talk about it, it might go deeper. Maybe, you know, your son or daughter, you might find something out that they haven't expressed before. It's a good way of learning more about your family or friends. (Male, Sydney)

There's often concerts in Martin Place at lunch time. You see workers come out and enjoy their lunch and whatever is on stage. Gives them some stress relief. Changes their perspective from whatever is going on in their office, gives them a broader perspective on life. (Female, Sydney)



Opportunities to improve health outcomes through investment in arts and culture in Australia

The evidence is clear: effective investment in arts and culture generates tangible and measurable health and wellbeing benefits. These in turn can also flow on to generate further economic, social and other benefits.

In light of this conclusive evidence, Australia's public and private investors, policy makers and other stakeholders who want to improve health and wellbeing outcomes should:

Develop an arts and culture participation program

Develop a public participation campaign promoting the benefits of creative activity, similar to public health campaigns promoting regular exercise, regular health checks, diet modifications and so on. This campaign could be supported by arts-and-culture health-based programs delivered in government-run health care facilities.

Prioritise arts and culture programs for key health areas

Capitalise on the proven positive impacts of arts and cultural interventions in treating loneliness and mitigating the risk of dementia – develop programs to extend these benefits across Australian communities.

Develop evidence-based arts and culture health interventions

Establish randomised-controlled trials for Australia-specific interventions to develop effective programs with maximised benefits.

To improve arts and cultural health and wellbeing opportunities for all Australians; inform a contemporary approach to cultural and creative industry development; and address Covid-19 recovery, Australia's public and private investors, policy makers and other stakeholders should:

Champion a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan

A National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan would inform more coherent policy settings and investment at all three levels of government. This could be achieved in the same vein as the existing National Sport Plan, 'Sport 2030', that identifies enduring and non-partisan principles and clarifies responsibilities.

More information

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A New Approach is an independent think tank championing effective investment and return in Australian arts and culture. We research and report on arts and culture investment issues and policy settings. By sharing our findings with key Australian decision-makers, we support the development and implementation of effective, informed and strategic investment.

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The information and data provided here is detailed further – with evidence sources – in our 2019 Insight Report, 'Transformative: impacts of culture and creativity'. The quotes from middle Australians are from our 2020 Insight Report, 'A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity'.

See www.humanities.org.au/new-approach for more information and to access the full reports.

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