

The Performing Arts and Overall Well-Being

Introduction

Contained within the performing arts is the opportunity for improved overall well-being. Through being involved in the performing arts, a person can improve their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive well-being. There is much research conducted in this area, and I have seen these benefits myself, through my own experiences being involved in the performing arts, and through what I observed as a Ralla scholar in the Ralla Klepak Performing Arts Initiative. The goal of this paper is to combine research with personal experience to describe the benefits to well-being that can occur from involvement in each of the categories of the performing arts: drama, music, fine art, and dance. It is interesting to note that each of these aspects of the performing arts have been integrated into therapy methods, indicating the incredible benefits they can bring to a person.

Drama

Drama has extremely positive impacts in the areas of emotional and social well-being. Emotional benefits include emotional release, increased emotional awareness, and self-confidence. Involvement in drama can also lead to improvements in social skills such as teamwork and communication. Drama therapy or standard involvement in drama is beneficial for people in all stages of life who would like to see improvement in these areas, regardless of medical or psychological diagnoses.

Involvement in drama is very helpful in improving emotional well-being, specifically for children, though it has benefits for everyone. One of the main emotional benefits that results from acting is the ability to experience emotional release. Within a structured and accepting atmosphere, drama enables a person to release their emotions in a healthy way. Many children have not

developed the skills to release their emotions in a healthy manner, due to a lack of communication skills, experience, or maturity. Giving children the outlet to release and express their emotions through acting helps them cope with their emotions and practice working through them (Necco et al., 1982). Additionally, children are not usually very emotionally aware. In taking on a role in a dramatic performance, children must learn about emotions, including how to identify different emotions, as well as how they look and feel. Through acting, children gain an emotional awareness that can then be applied to their own lives, whether in helping them identify and address their own emotional needs, or in enabling them to become more aware and empathetic towards others' emotional needs. Another emotional benefit that results from acting is an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence. When performing, a person is able to step out of their perception of self, and through temporarily adopting a new identity, one is able to discover more about themselves and feel better about who they are. Confidence also increases from feeling valued and having a purpose, being treated as an adult, and overcoming difficulties (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017), all of which occur from being involved in a performance. This increase in confidence that results from acting is one of the most noticeable benefits of drama.

Through my own acting experiences, I personally benefited from an increase in confidence. As a child, I was extremely shy and quiet. I really disliked speaking in public, and was not very social. One of the strongest factors that has enabled me to gain the confidence to speak in public and become more social was acting in my school and camp plays. What got me over the hurdle of speaking and performing on stage was taking on a new persona. The characters I played were not scared of speaking in front of other people, and through embracing the characters, I was able to overcome my own fears. Another example of an increase in confidence resulting from drama involvement is of one of the students that took part in the Ralla Klepak Performing Arts Initiative.

She was cast as one of the main roles, and she did an incredible job commanding the stage.

Afterwards, I heard that she is normally very shy and quiet, and people who knew her before were shocked by her ability to perform at the level that she did.

Drama also provides benefits in the area of social well-being. Putting on a performance enables a person to develop the skills to be able to work as part of a team. In order for a performance to be effective, there has to be a realization among all the participants that they are each an important piece in the performance and that everyone needs to be able to cooperate and work as a team (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). In my earlier years acting in my school plays, I was cast in very small roles. Despite having few lines, an emphasis was always put on the fact that the cast is a team and that every small role is important and vital to the success of the team. Just because I had few lines was no reason for me to slack off and let the rest of the team down. Besides enabling the success of the play, being part of a team helps a person gain skills to develop better relationships with family and peers outside of the acting team (ibid.). Another social benefit that results from acting is improved communication skills. A 2020 review conducted by Batdi and Elaldi concluded that among other things, involvement in drama is linked to improved social communication skills, and as such, involvement in drama should be viewed as a necessary way to prepare oneself for teaching or other professions that require effective communication skills. A similar conclusion was reached by Jefferies et al. (2020) who emphasized the importance of drama in undergraduate and postgraduate nursing education to promote the development of interpersonal skills, including communication. Regular drama involvement also encourages a sense of community and belonging, especially for older adults who often are lacking social opportunities (Sextou & Smith, 2017).

There are also benefits to drama involvement or therapy for members of atypical groups, such as people with dementia or psychiatric disorders. For people with dementia, drama therapy has been shown to improve their quality of life, with positive changes in the areas of relationships, the ability to communicate, personal identity, and emotional release (Jaaniste et al., 2015). Additionally, drama therapy helps alleviate symptoms in patients with psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (Chiu, 2011).

Music

Music and singing have incredible positive impacts on a person's overall well-being. The benefits of music affect emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being. Listening to music can provide some benefit, but making music, be it singing or playing an instrument, has been found to have an even greater impact.

The main area of benefit from music is in emotional well-being. Listening to and producing music is associated with an increased production of dopamine, a hormone that makes us feel good through activating the reward system in the brain (Sima, 2022). School-aged individuals who listen to or produce music for as little as ten minutes a day will often have decreased anxiety, depression, and irritability, improved mood, and increased vigor and relaxation. In the general adult population, the benefits of music are similar to that of children, with the addition of reduced stress and anger. In elderly populations, music has the added benefits of an increased quality of life and morale and decreased loneliness. These emotional benefits also exist for people with chronic health conditions (Daykin et al., 2017). Further, a study about older adults and producing music concluded that making music has a positive impact on several areas of well-being, including satisfaction, enhanced pleasure, fulfillment, and engagement (Perkins & Williamon, 2013). Additionally, in times of crisis,

such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people found music to be the factor that enabled them to achieve their emotional wellness goals, such as enjoyment, venting negative emotions, self-connection, and diversion (Granot et al., 2021).

Music is also able to help a person with mental health conditions achieve their emotional well-being goals. Music therapy, which is the use of music in a therapeutic context with the goal of improving mental health, is very helpful for these people. People with depression, postnatal depression, schizophrenia, and psychosis may be able to use music therapy and singing to help reduce their symptoms (Wang & Agius, 2018).

Another positive outcome of music is in the area of physical well-being. Music is able to improve sleep quality, including longer sleep duration, greater sleep efficiency, shorter sleep latency, less sleep disturbance, and less daytime dysfunction. It has also been found that the effects of music on sleep have a cumulative effect, with the quality of sleep improving with each additional week of music use (Wang & Agius, 2018). Additionally, music therapy is helpful in treating certain symptoms associated with Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease is a neurological motor condition that impairs movement. Common symptoms of Parkinson's include tremors, muscle rigidity, a slow, shuffling gait, and difficulty maintaining balance. Music therapy has been found to help with many of these symptoms. A rhythmic beat in music is able to help Parkinson's patients sync their steps to a rhythm and walk more naturally, as well as improve their walking speed. Also, playing an instrument has been found to help improve motor function, balance, and walking speed (Sima, 2022).

Music can also have effects on the cognitive well-being of people with dementia and people who stutter. When a person develops dementia, their memory is impacted, but there has been research that suggests that musical memory remains. Musicians with Alzheimer's disease are

often able to continue playing their instruments, and even non-musicians can learn and recall new music even in the severe stages of the disease. Therefore, music might be able to be used as a treatment for some symptoms of dementia. Because a person's musical memory is untouched by dementia, music can stimulate personal memories that would otherwise remain forgotten. These music-evoked autobiographical memories are able to return a sense of self to dementia patients, and can also benefit cognitive functions, such as expressive language in people with dementia (Baird & Thompson, 2018). Music can also help with expressive language skills in people who stutter. People who stutter are often able to sing without difficulty, and therefore, music can be a treatment method to help a person gain the confidence to be able to speak fluently, as well as use singing techniques in everyday speech to make speaking easier for them (Clements-Cortès, 2012).

Fine Art

The fine arts are an easy form of self-expression. There are no rules; everything is just based on the artist's feelings and perception. The final product is subjective, and therefore escapes the judgment of others. Therefore, producing art is beneficial for emotional well-being. Additionally, the fine arts component of the performing arts has social benefits to it as well.

Art therapy, or just creating art, is beneficial to those who wish to express their emotions, but find it challenging to put them into words. Many believe that such a therapy is beneficial to everyone, but there is only research regarding specific populations, such as children, cancer patients, those with neurodegenerative diseases, and the mentally ill, since the benefit is more drastic and noticeable in these populations. This form of creative expression enables a person to identify their emotions, but even more than that, it helps a person deal with those emotions, since they are more external and much less daunting when they are on paper (Hutson, 2007).

Involvement in the fine arts is emotionally beneficial for those who are at risk for mental health issues, as well as those who are not, although the benefit is much easier to see for those who do suffer from mental health conditions. Wilson et al. (2017) describe the long-term effects of twelve weeks of group art therapy for people who suffer from or are at risk for mental health disorders. Their research is a follow-up six months after the twelve week program, and they found that the improvements in emotional well-being, including confidence, positive feelings, and relationships, were still much higher than the baseline levels, although they had decreased slightly from the conclusion of the program. Other researchers have identified additional components of emotional well-being that art therapy can improve for people suffering from mental health conditions. These include a sense of purpose and independence, which can help with the recovery process, improved self-esteem, stability, the ability to relax, and positive social interactions (Crone et al., 2012).

Art-based intervention is extremely important for children who are at risk or suffering from mental health issues. Besides the emotional outlet that art provides, art therapy is a way to engage children to participate in their own healing. Additionally, art helps students by reducing stress and anxiety, increasing mindfulness, and improving creative ideation. Involvement in art helps children develop effective coping skills, manage their emotions, and express themselves, all of which will enable them to lead more productive lives emotionally, socially, and academically (IAM Lab, 2021).

Art intervention is also emotionally beneficial to special populations, including pregnant women, stroke patients, and people suffering from dementia. Pregnant women, especially during their first pregnancy, are in need of emotional and social support beyond standard prenatal care. Many women feel that when paired with standard prenatal care, art-based interventions, which

support the expression of complex emotions, encourage a sense of connection, and strengthen personal resourcefulness, provide the additional emotional care that they need (Crane et al., 2021). Research conducted by Morris et al. (2019) seems to indicate that there is benefit to art-based intervention for people recovering from a stroke, although their research is not conclusive about how the art benefits these patients. Johnson et al. (2015) researched the benefits provided by different museum art-viewing activities for patients with dementia. They found that though object-handling had more of an impact on dementia patients, art-viewing also benefited them in the areas of happiness, wellness, interest, confidence, and optimism.

Participation in art as part of the performing arts also has social well-being benefits, due to the fact that creating art for a performance requires cooperation and teamwork. I was able to observe this during the Ralla Klepak Performing Arts Initiative, as I ran the art component of the program. Most of the students who chose to participate in the art program did so because they were shy and were not comfortable performing on stage. Because of that, the first few weeks were very quiet, and most of the girls did not talk much. As the program progressed, and we started seeing all the pieces come together, I noticed a change in many of the girls. They had started chatting and joking around more, and they were overall much more comfortable and confident. They were working more as a team, as opposed to each individual focusing only on what she had to get done.

Dance

Given that dance is a form of physical exercise, it is obvious that it has a positive impact on physical well-being. In addition, dance provides benefits in emotional and social well-being. The benefits resulting from dance and dance therapy are not exclusive to normal populations, the

benefits also exist for people with Parkinson's, children with Autism, people with mental health conditions, and others.

Dance has many physical well-being benefits for the average person, though possibly not much more than any other form of exercise. Unlike many other forms of exercise though, dance does help improve coordination and rhythm. For this reason, dance is becoming more recognized as an important component of treatment for Parkinson's disease. For individuals suffering from Parkinson's, dance intervention can help improve gait and balance, as well as overall functional mobility. Dance for Parkinson's research aims to focus not just on how dance affects clinical signs and symptoms, but also how dance affects participation in daily activities (McGill et al., 2014).

Another important area that dance helps improve is the area of emotional well-being. The average individual can benefit emotionally from dance, as it can decrease stress levels, improve mental health, increase feelings of autonomy, and reduce isolation (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). Dance therapy can also have emotional benefits for atypical populations, including children with autism, older adults with dementia, and people with mental disorders. For children with autism, after dance therapy intervention, improvement was observed in their emotional regulation, conduct, and hyperactivity (Aithal et al., 2021). Dance therapy also provides emotional benefits for people suffering from dementia. Dance provides them with the opportunity to enjoy and experience the connection between thoughts, feelings and physical sensations, which is often lacking in dementia patients (Lyons et al., 2018). Dance-based intervention is also extremely beneficial for people rehabilitating from mental health conditions. Dance is able to improve emotional well-being through enhancing self-awareness and self-control (Ren et al., 2021).

Dance also has the ability to improve social well-being. Dancing with other people can help foster connection and develop relationships. The social benefits of dance are better seen in

non-typical populations, including children with autism and people with mental disorders, since the changes observed are more drastic than in typical populations. Dance therapy for children with autism is able to improve their peer relationships and pro-social behavior, as well as improve their communication skills, regardless of if they communicate verbally or non-verbally (Aithal et al., 2021). In mental health rehabilitation, dance therapy helps the patient readapt to society, restore their social function, and improve interpersonal function (Ren et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The benefits that exist in promoting overall well-being through involvement in the performing arts are incredible. In addition to the benefits for the average person, drama, music, art, and dance have all been integrated into therapy as ways to treat various conditions and disorders. All aspects of the performing arts can help improve emotional, social, physical, and cognitive well-being. Because of the extensive benefits that the performing arts can have on a person's overall well-being, arts education should be readily accessible to everyone who wants to benefit from it. This is the exact reason why the Ralla Klepak Performing Arts Initiative was started. I chose to be a Ralla Scholar because I have benefited so much from being involved in the performing arts, and I wanted to be able to provide other girls with the opportunity to benefit from the performing arts as much as they possibly can.

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