

ART MUSEUMS AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Millions of people visit art museums each year, and research is beginning to clarify how these visits can increase human flourishing. Flourishing can be understood in terms of high well-being and low ill-being, considered on individual and collective levels, and fostered through specific programs.

To learn more, see [Cotter & Pawelski \(2022\)](#), *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

WELL-BEING VS. ILL-BEING

Flourishing can be broken down into two components: high well-being and low ill-being. [1]

- **High Well-Being** refers to the presence of strengths, meaning, and other positive elements.
- **Low Ill-Being** refers to the absence of disease, disorder, and other negative elements.

INDIVIDUAL VS. COLLECTIVE FLOURISHING

Flourishing can be considered at different social levels:

- **Individual Flourishing** focuses on personal outcomes, such as happiness or sense of meaning.
- **Collective Flourishing** focuses on communal or social outcomes, such as community cohesion or social justice.

FLOURISHING AND THE ARTS

One way of fostering flourishing through the arts is social prescribing, where medical providers write prescriptions for various kinds of social activities, including visits to art museums.

Social prescribing can have a variety of positive outcomes, including reducing doctor's visits and decreasing hospital admissions. [2]

ART MUSEUMS AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

A review of current research suggests that art museums can have a significant positive impact on human flourishing by boosting physical and mental health, raising subjective and emotional well-being, and promoting feelings of social connection.

To learn more, see [Cotter & Pawelski \(2022\)](#), *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Stress: Visiting art museums can reduce cortisol (a stress hormone) and subjective perceptions of stress. [3]

Depression: Engaging in art-viewing and art-making workshops can lessen symptoms of depression. [4]

Dementia: Regular art museum visitation is related to a lower risk of being diagnosed with dementia. [5]

SUBJECTIVE AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Subjective Well-Being and Health: Visiting art museums promotes subjective well-being and strengthens perceptions of health. [6]

Quality of Life: People's perceived quality of life can be boosted through visiting art museums. [7]

Emotion: Art museums can boost positive emotions and a feeling of engagement; visiting them is seen as a positive experience. [8]

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Connection: Art museums can help people feel less disconnected and more equipped to take steps to connect with others. [9]

Inclusion: Visiting art museums can make people feel more included and able to form relationships with others with similar interests. [10]

Community Building: Art museums can enhance feelings of community. [7]

ART MUSEUMS AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

This report was prepared by the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project (HHF), a National Endowment for the Arts Research Lab located at the University of Pennsylvania.

To learn more about HHF and its range of projects connected to the arts and humanities, visit www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.

ABOUT THE HUMANITIES AND HUMAN FLOURISHING PROJECT (HHF)

HHF has been part of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania since 2014. Founded and directed by James O. Pawelski, HHF seeks to explore ways in which the arts and humanities relate to well-being through the lens of the Positive Humanities. [11]

To learn about HHF and the Positive Humanities, visit our [website](http://www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org).

REFERENCES

- [1] Pawelski, J. O. (2016) Defining the 'positive' in positive psychology: Part II. A normative analysis. *Journal of Positive Psychology*.
- [2] All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health, and Wellbeing. (2017). *Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing*.
- [3] Clow, A. & Fredhoi, C. (2006). Normalisation of salivary cortisol levels and self-report stress by a brief lunchtime visit to an art gallery by London city workers. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*.
- [4] D'Cunha, N. M. et al. (2019). Psychophysiological responses in people living with dementia after an art gallery intervention: An exploratory study. *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*.
- [5] Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A., & Cadar, D. (2018). Cultural engagement and cognitive reserve: Museum attendance and dementia incidence over a 10-year period. *British Journal of Psychiatry*.
- [6] Wilkinson, A. V. et al. (2007). Are variation in rates of attending cultural activities associated with population health in the United States. *BMC Public Health*.
- [7] Michalos, A. C. & Kahlke, P. M. (2010). Arts and perceived quality of life in British Columbia. *Social Indicators Research*.
- [8] Roberts, S., Camic, P. M., & Springham, N. (2011). New roles for art galleries: Art-viewing as a community intervention for family carers of people with mental health problems. *Arts & Health*.
- [9] Koebner, I. J. et al. (2019). The art of analgesia: A pilot study of art museum tours to decrease pain and social disconnection among individuals with chronic pain. *Pain Medicine*.
- [10] Herron, A. & Jamieson, A. (2020). Grandfathers at Melbourne Museum: Shining a spotlight on overlooked museum visitors. *Visitor Studies*.
- [11] Pawelski, J. O. (2022). The Positive Humanities: Culture and human flourishing. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis or the National Endowment for the Arts. The National Endowment for the Arts does not guarantee the accuracy or completeness of the information included in this material and is not responsible for any consequences of its use. This NEA Research Lab is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts (Award#: 1862782-38-C-20).