

# Visual Arts for Flourishing Research Toolkit

*Resources for  
Application and  
Advocacy*

THE HUMANITIES AND HUMAN FLOURISHING PROJECT  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA  
PHILADELPHIA, PA



# VISUAL ARTS FOR FLOURISHING RESEARCH TOOLKIT: RESOURCES FOR APPLICATION AND ADVOCACY

The visual arts play an important role in human flourishing across the lifespan and around the world. Our individual and collective well-being is supported by artists and art collectives, by art educators and programs, and by art museums and galleries. Yet it can be difficult to know the precise effects of these individuals, groups, and organizations on flourishing in different contexts. And it can be difficult to make these effects visible to funders, administrators, and policy makers.

Scientific research can help expand our knowledge of these effects, supporting both nuanced application and effective advocacy. We are fortunate that more and more research is being done on the wide range of benefits that can result from various forms of engagement with the visual arts. The purpose of the present toolkit is to bring together some of the most important research suggesting how the visual arts can support flourishing. We have arranged the research into five domains of flourishing: general well-being, mental well-being, empathy and perspective-taking, social well-being, and community well-being.

We hope artists, educators, museum professionals, and others will find this toolkit useful. We have selected for inclusion the research we thought would be most supportive of their endeavors. This is our first version of the toolkit, and it is by no means final or complete. Our plan is to expand this toolkit in the future, adding more domains of flourishing and more research as it becomes available. We welcome your feedback on how we can improve further editions of the toolkit. Please send your thoughts and suggestions to us at [hhf-project@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:hhf-project@sas.upenn.edu).

This research toolkit has been prepared by the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project (HHF) at the University of Pennsylvania. The mission of HHF is to understand, assess, and advance the well-being benefits of engagement in the visual arts, music, movies, literature, theater, history, religion, philosophy, and other cultural forms. Launched in 2014, HHF consists of a core team at the University of Pennsylvania and a growing, international network of arts and humanities scholars, scientific researchers, creative practitioners, educators, wellness officers, policy experts, members of government, and leaders of cultural organizations. Together, we seek to understand the nature of human flourishing

more deeply, investigate its causes and correlates more broadly, and support its cultivation more effectively. You can find out more about our work at [www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org](http://www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org), where you will also find updated versions of this toolkit in the future.

I am grateful to my HHF colleagues Katherine Cotter and Sarah Sidoti for their excellent work on this toolkit. Very special thanks to Alina Spas, who spearheaded the literature search for—and thoughtful summation of—these documents. As a team, we are grateful to our museum-professional partners who requested we assemble this toolkit and pointed out how valuable it would be for their efforts. We are also grateful for the support of our funders, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Drue and H. J. Heinz II Charitable Trust, and the University of Pennsylvania, acknowledging that the information contained in this toolkit does not necessarily express their views.

Finally, we are grateful to you for reading this research toolkit. We hope you find it informative and useful in the important work you do to advance the flourishing of individuals and communities through the visual arts.

James O. Pawelski



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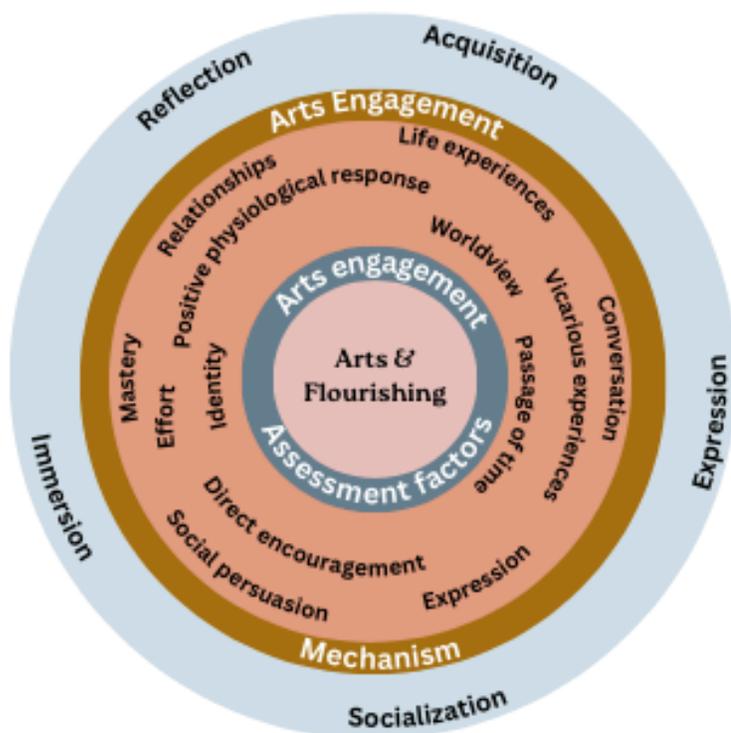
# ARTS & FLOURISHING

## OVERVIEW

Flourishing is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity).<sup>1</sup> Human flourishing involves both high well-being and low ill-being. Fostering well-being means promoting and preserving factors such as positive emotions, strengths, hope, meaning, purpose, and healthy relationships; working against ill-being means mitigating and preventing diseases, disorders, traumatic experiences, and other negative states and traits.<sup>2,3</sup>

The Positive Humanities seek to understand the relationship between engagement with arts and culture and various flourishing outcomes. The Positive Humanities integrate perspectives from the arts and humanities with methods of scientific investigation used in psychology and other social sciences to advance a balanced and comprehensive approach to human flourishing.<sup>2</sup>

The figure below identifies the assessment factors of arts engagement as well as arts engagement mechanisms.<sup>3</sup>



# BROADER SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

## **Positive outcomes of engagement with the arts include sense-making, aesthetic appreciation, entertainment, and bonding.<sup>4</sup>**

Benefits of art engagement include reduced risk for mental health conditions, decreased loneliness, decreased negative affect, and lower mortality risks, as well as greater subjective health, increased positive affect, higher levels of relaxation, and a greater sense of community and belonging.<sup>4</sup>

## **Social prescribing (prescribing attendance at cultural events) connects individuals to resources within their community that can alleviate existing health conditions and foster engagement in positive health behaviors.**

In the UK, the “Arts on Prescription” program was associated with a 37% decrease in doctor visits and a 27% reduction in hospital admissions.<sup>6</sup>

## **Arts engagement promotes positive emotions, creativity, performance, cognitive enhancement and a sense of identity in older people.**

In an older population, well-being-focused art museum programs increase feelings of social engagement, enhance positive emotions, and raise levels of overall well-being. In people with dementia, art-making and art discussion programs reduce social isolation and depression as well as boost self-confidence, engagement, emotional well-being, and quality of life.<sup>6</sup>

## **Participation in the arts and humanities may uniquely contribute to our character strengths.**

Holocaust and Humanity Museum employs the arts' ability to increase our appreciation of excellence to promote positive behaviors and strengths. Arts and humanities can also build emotion regulation skills, including the affirmation of values, effective use of language, emotional awareness, adjustment of emotion regulation strategies, and perspective-taking.<sup>5</sup>

## **Visiting art museums and engaging in museum programming is linked to more positive emotions and is viewed as a rewarding experience.<sup>5</sup>**

Immediate emotional responses to artwork activate brain areas involved in emotion regulation, pleasure, and reward.<sup>7</sup> Visiting art museums is associated with lower stress, lower levels of anxiety and depression, lower risk of dementia, higher well-being, higher quality of life, and better health.<sup>6</sup>

## **Art museums can help build connected communities, providing visitors with a sense of connection and feelings of inclusion.**

Art museums can improve well-being by promoting positive emotions, engagement in life and activities, positive relationships, positive traits and character strengths, transformative experiences, meaning and purpose in life, financial and material stability, autonomy, and sense of achievement.<sup>6</sup>

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# MENTAL FLOURISHING

## OVERVIEW

Mental flourishing refers to how we feel (our emotions and life satisfaction) and how we function (relationships with others, personal control, purpose in life, and independence)<sup>1</sup>. Mental flourishing is described as a dynamic state of internal balance and an actively-constructed positive resource, which allows individuals to feel good and use their abilities in alignment with universal values of society and of their respective cultures.<sup>1,2</sup>

Figure 1 below identifies social, emotional and psychological signs of mental flourishing as well as characteristics of people high in mental flourishing.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Figure 2 below identifies internal and external factors that facilitate mental flourishing.<sup>5,6</sup>

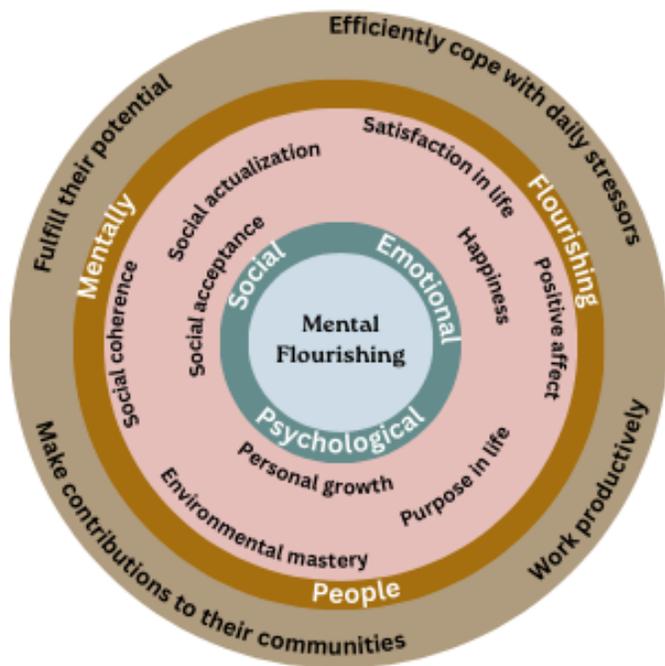


Figure 1

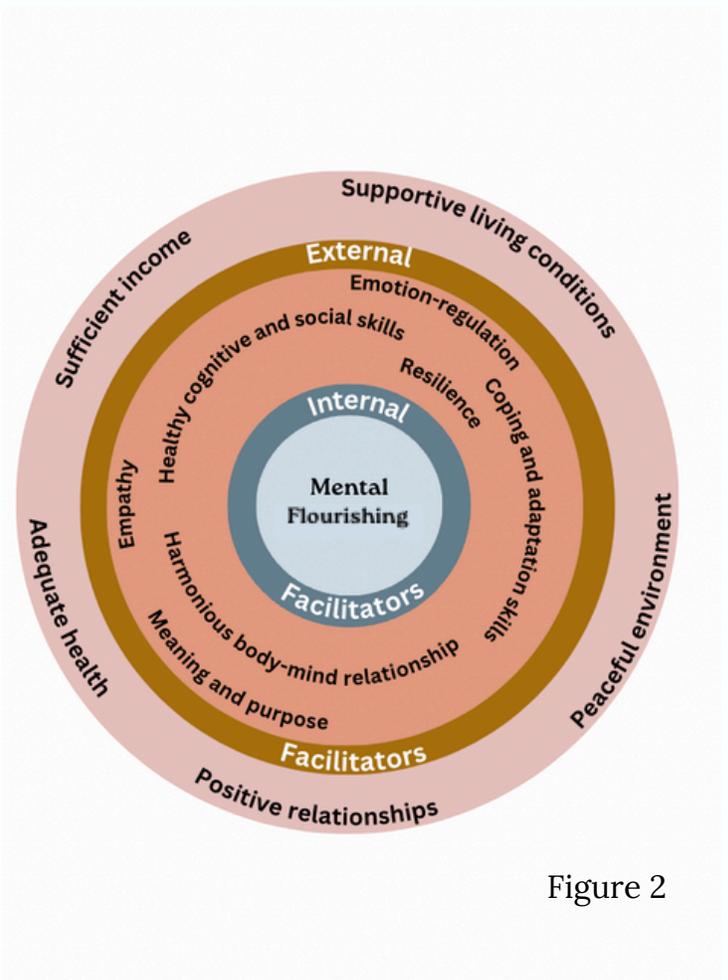


Figure 2

# BROADER SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

**Arts engagement helps children and adolescents to gain confidence, connect with peers, and engage in prosocial acts.**

Among adolescents, arts engagement develops self-efficacy by fostering peer communication, sharing of artistic accomplishments, and exchanging feedback on peer or professional artwork in China.<sup>7</sup> In adolescents with learning and mental health difficulties, creating visual art facilitates resilience by promoting peer connection, emotion-regulation, and prosocial behavior.<sup>8</sup>

**Arts engagement helps older adults feel and perform better.**

In older adults, arts group participation is associated with higher positive affect, life satisfaction, purpose in life, and mastery.<sup>14</sup> Interactive electronic art making promotes subjective health and well-being, social connectedness and intergenerational relationships, cognitive engagement, creativity, and self-expression.<sup>15</sup> Museum-based social prescribing sessions improve older adults' feelings of being 'absorbed' and 'enlightened', 'encouraged', 'cheerful', and 'active'.<sup>16</sup> Social prescribing also reduces doctor's visits and hospital admissions.<sup>13</sup>

**Arts engagement has a multitude of positive effects on adult well-being, ranging from mood regulation and stress reduction to personal empowerment.**

Among young adults, coloring reduces anxiety and negative mood, and also boosts perseverance, if there is freedom of artistic choice.<sup>9</sup> In adults, visual art making in an open studio improves positive affect and self-efficacy<sup>10</sup>. Art-making also improves connectedness, emotion-regulation, meaning-making, sense of identity, and personal empowerment. As for receptive participation, art museum visits reduce self-reported stress as well as enhance positive emotions and engagement.<sup>12,13</sup>

**Regular cultural engagement reduces symptoms of depression as well as decreases risk of depression for a decade.**

Engaging in art-viewing and art-making can lessen symptoms of depression, including apathy.<sup>13</sup> Cultural engagement through visiting museums, theater, and cinema decreases the risk of developing depression over the next 10 years in older adults by 32% if attended every few months and by 48% if attended at least once a month.<sup>17</sup>

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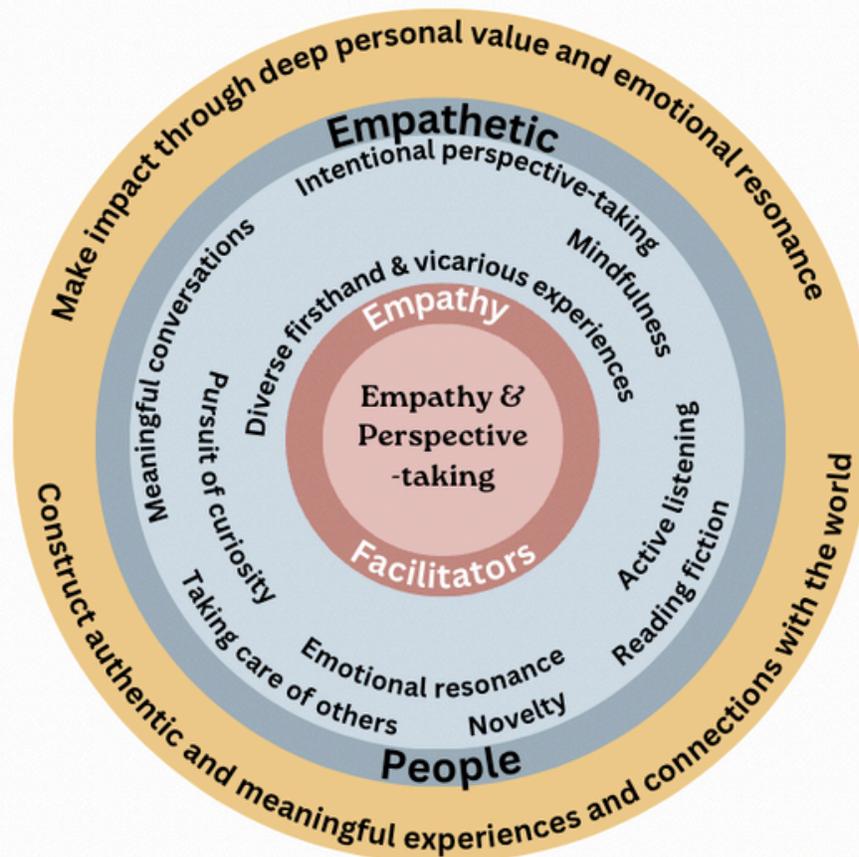
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# EMPATHY & PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

## OVERVIEW

Empathy refers to the ability to put yourself in the shoes of others. Similarly, perspective-taking refers to the ability to perceive a situation or understand a concept from an alternative point of view. Empathy is defined as the capacity to grasp another person's experience cognitively and emotionally.<sup>1</sup>

The figure below identifies factors facilitating empathy as well as characteristics of empathetic people.<sup>1,2</sup>



# BROADER SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

**Arts creation and arts consumption are associated with prosocial traits and behaviors, with arts consumption having large effects on prosocial traits.**

Arts creation and consumption are correlated with prosocial behaviors – donating, volunteering, and informal helping. Arts consumption, including museum visits, is bidirectionally associated with all these prosocial behaviors when measured 7 years later.<sup>3</sup>

**Empathy nourished by arts engagement promotes tolerance in adolescents.**

In adolescents, an arts-based program focused on social and emotional skill building increases social awareness, empathic concern, and perspective-taking components of empathic development.<sup>4</sup> In young adults, an arts-based intervention designed to nurture empathy via visual literacy activities has a positive effect on cognitive aspects of empathy, with increased attention, tolerance of others' feelings and perspectives, and creativity.<sup>5</sup>

**General and interpersonal empathy promotes higher-quality artistic experiences.**

In adults, high ability to “feel into” paintings is associated with more intense bodily reactions and aesthetic evaluations (being moved, higher valence, and interest), as well as with greater appreciation of art.<sup>6</sup> Empathy enables people to take the perspective of others in terms of aesthetic judgments and inferences and also to adopt the perspective of an artwork's content and form.<sup>7</sup>

**Arts engagement promotes empathy by offering a glimpse into others' perspectives.**

In older adults, the arts provide narratives to connect and visual structure to improve social understanding.<sup>8</sup> As for empathy towards older adults, young adults participating in a digital storytelling program (where older adults share emotional experiences) report positive improvement in attitudes based on empathy and challenging their perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

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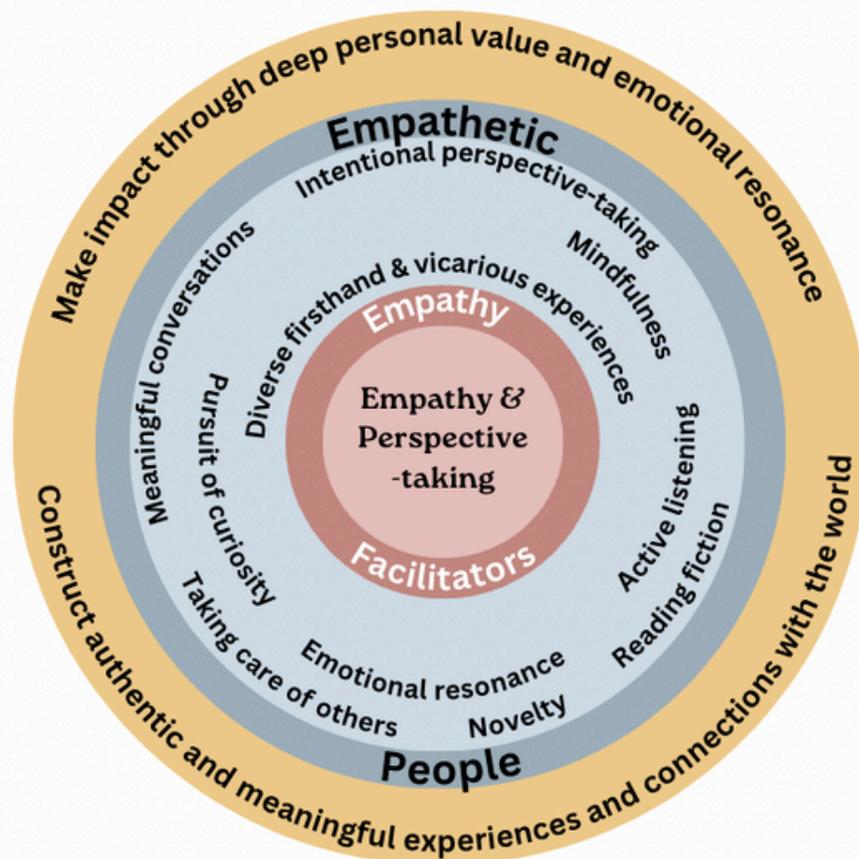
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# SOCIAL FLOURISHING

## OVERVIEW

Social flourishing refers to the ability to form, maintain, and develop positive relations with others that result in peace and opportunities for individual and collective advancement. Social flourishing is defined as an array of factors that foster constructive, fulfilling, and sustainable interactions and relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 below identifies dimensions of social flourishing as well as characteristics of socially flourishing people.<sup>1,2</sup> Figure 2 below identifies factors promoting social flourishing on individual and collective levels.<sup>3,4</sup>

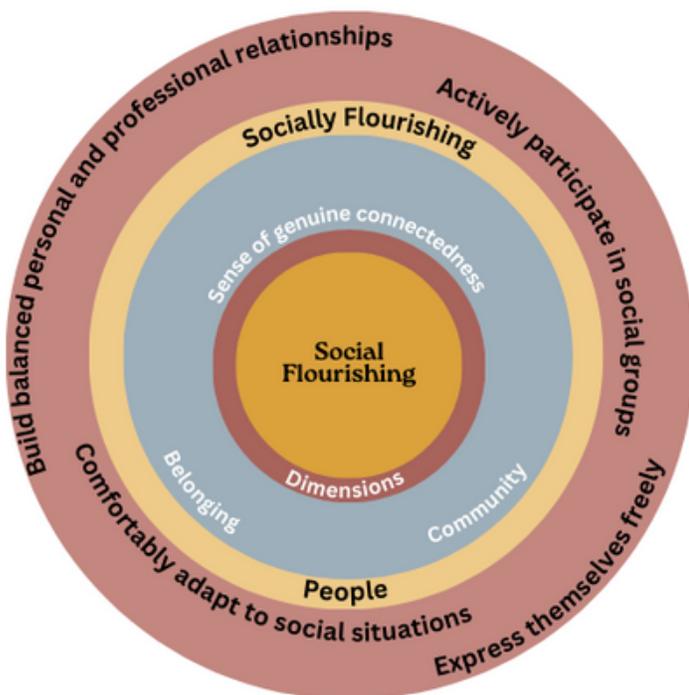


Figure 1

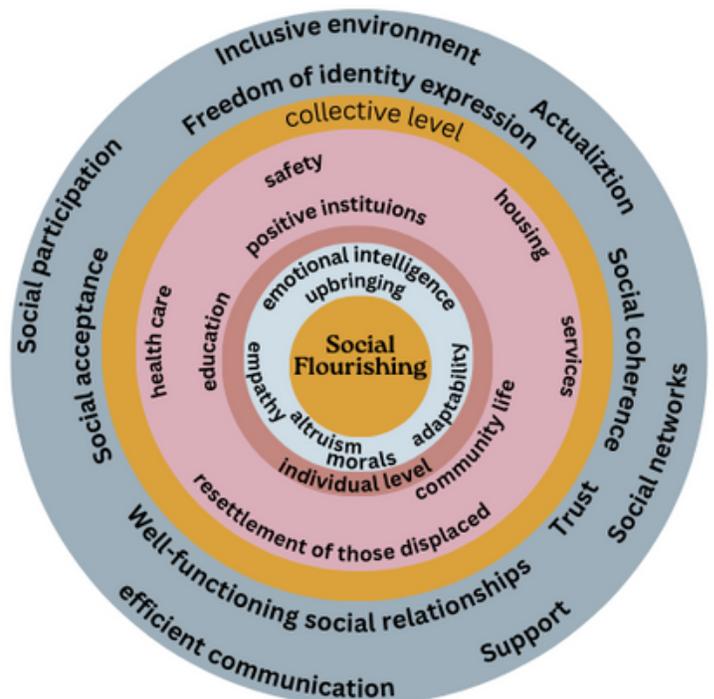


Figure 2

# BROADER SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

## Loneliness needs to be addressed with an immediate collective effort.

Loneliness is associated with a risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and increased by 26% risk of premature death. Community organizations can foster a culture of connection by creating inclusive spaces, adopting policies that prioritize connection, promoting awareness, building partnerships, and providing resources.<sup>5</sup>

## Arts engagement promotes positive social integration in children and adolescents.

For children and young adults, the visual arts have a positive effect on self-confidence, relationship building, sense of belonging, and resilience.<sup>6</sup> For immigrant high school students, open-studio art-making positively influences their sense of connection, competence, courage, and feelings of being valued in a group.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, museum-based psychotherapy with young adults facilitates interaction, independence, motivation, and creativity, and helps them feel connected to the world.<sup>8</sup>

## Arts engagement facilitates social connectedness via social opportunities, sharing, commonality, belonging, and collective understanding<sup>9</sup>.

82 % of adults in the UK perceive their arts engagement to be linked to feelings of social connectedness.<sup>10</sup> Adults demonstrate interest, engagement, satisfaction as well as improved communication, and social relations following museum visits and related art workshop participation in Brazil.<sup>11</sup> In adults with chronic pain, art museum tours lead to decreased social disconnection and relieved pain by 47%.<sup>12</sup>

## Arts engagement helps older adults feel like they belong.

For older adults, visual arts interventions that foster social inclusion and respect improve social connectedness, self-confidence, interactions, and relationships, and reduce social isolation. Additionally, visual arts interventions allow older adults to feel like a part of the group.<sup>13</sup>

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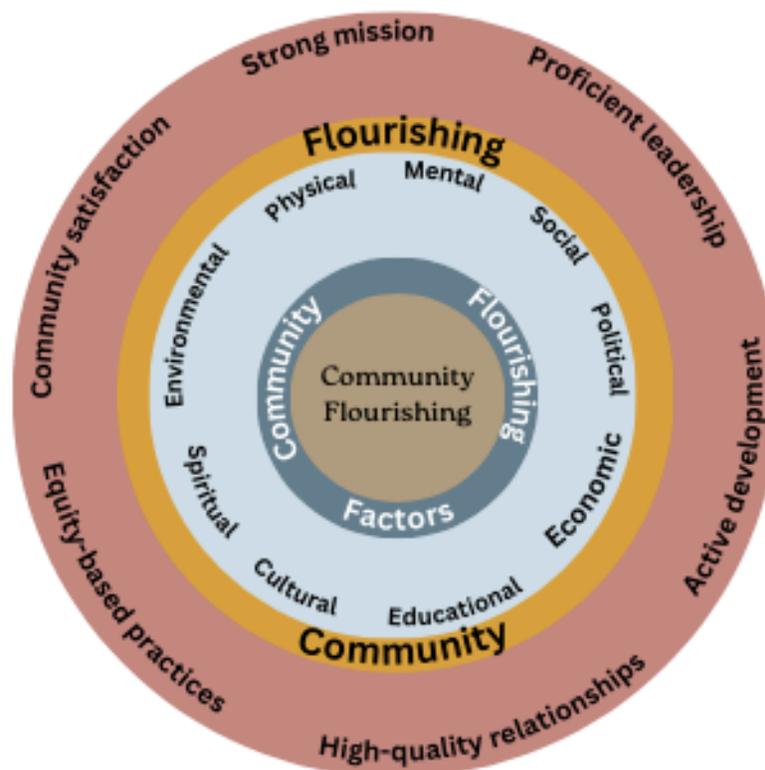
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# COMMUNITY FLOURISHING

## OVERVIEW

Community flourishing refers to “being well together” and to positive impacts that involvement with a community has on our health, resilience, and belonging. Community flourishing is a dynamic interplay between conditions that enable communities and community members to multiply and maintain resources for their wellness and potential fulfillment. Factors promoting community flourishing support community values and provide a sense of security within individual, collective, and national standards of well-being.<sup>1,2</sup> Community flourishing is facilitated by community-informed and value-driven social relations, services, shared spaces, and decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

The figure below identifies the factors contributing to community flourishing as well as characteristics of a flourishing community.<sup>1,2,3</sup>



# BROADER SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

## Arts engagement helps to promote health education and cope with illness.

The arts help build awareness of health issues as well as understanding of perceptions of health issues in society.<sup>4</sup> For people with life-limiting illness, arts engagement promotes an improved sense of well-being and connection with others, a re-discovered sense of self, and resilience.<sup>5</sup>

## Participation in museums as “spaces of care” helps overcome social inequalities, social exclusion, and stigmatization.

Participation in museum community engagement projects as “spaces of care” improves self-esteem, confidence, awareness of social inequality and identity issues as well as overall feelings of well-being. “Spaces of care” enhance participants’ knowledge for challenging the stigma of mental illness and poverty.<sup>6</sup>

## Arts engagement helps adolescents to successfully recover from difficult communal experiences.

For adolescents who experienced school violence, community arts engagement promotes resilience by nurturing problem-solving creativity, meaning-making, and community pride.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, for youths who experienced migrational adversity, participation in arts and community change projects improves sense of purpose and hope, self-expression skills, confidence to engage with their community, and social cohesion.<sup>8</sup>

## Arts engagement helps to promote health education and cope with illness.

For people with dementia, handling museum artifacts increases feelings of happiness, wellness, interest, confidence, and optimism; and participation in visual community art-viewing and art-making improves attention, pleasure, and negative affect.<sup>9,10</sup> Crucially, visiting museums every few months or more is associated with a lower incidence of dementia over the following 10 years.<sup>11</sup>

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