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Research in Practice

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Today, we live in a society that increasingly promotes a stressful and mentally challenging lifestyle, the results of which can be seen by a significant proportion of the population suffering consequences that affect their quality of life. In our culture there are inherently accepted notions that art has more applications than the purely visceral, but to what degree can creativity impact our emotions and is it possible to use it to assist in enhancing our wellbeing? Furthermore, how can creativity assist people with mental health conditions, both chronic and situational. By researching the theories behind human wellbeing, emotion and creativity, I intend to ascertain how artistic methods can be used as a practical form of therapy to help people who struggle to reach their optimal mental wellness.

An individual's quality of life is entirely subjective and can internally present itself in many forms relating to different areas of personal interest and the goals within those affairs. *"Wellbeing can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole."* (New Economics Foundation, 2012). Although this evidence describes a broader example of the definition, in more recent times due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic there has been more focus on the collective mental health within our society. This is as a result of lockdowns and restrictions causing significant alterations to peoples' routines. *"On a population-wide basis, the negative mental health effects of the pandemic are likely to last much longer than its physical health impacts. The effects of physical distancing, social isolation, and lockdown on individual mental wellbeing, as well as the loss of a loved one, increase the mental health challenges for the UK population."* (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). This study expands upon the information understood by us as members of society, in relation to the non-physical effects of the pandemic as a whole and how these shall remain long after the social restrictions have eased. While SARS-CoV-2 has presented an immediate threat to our physical health and for some people their existence, emotions which have evolved to coexist with our functional senses, potentially play a more important role in our overall well-being. *"Things such as pleasure, wealth, and honour are good in so far as they promote our well-being, but well-being for humans consists ultimately in eudaimonia, that is, happiness or flourishing, and the aim of practical philosophy is to determine what well-being is and how it is to be secured"* (Aristotle & D. Miller Jr., 2018). The ancient Greek Philosophy of Eudaimonia can be related strongly to the effect the pandemic has had on the population; due to a lack of "flourishing", people are feeling as though they are not achieving as much as they would if there were no pandemic, resulting in decreased mental health and therefore general wellbeing.



Figure 1

Similar principles to these Greek theories appear in the more modern psychology of 'Flow'; which is the practice of maintaining focused attention in the present while engaging with personal interests and activities, resulting in rewarding emotions. *"Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). These studies into 'Flow' further explain how human beings utilise their freedom and expression while carrying out routine chores and hobbies to increase their mental wellbeing, which in this case expands our understanding of how the restrictions from the pandemic have ultimately had an impact on achieving any optimal experiences in our daily lives. *"Whenever information disrupts*

consciousness by threatening its goals we have a condition of inner disorder, or psychic entropy, a disorganisation of the self that impairs its effectiveness. Prolonged experiences of this kind can weaken the self to the point that it is no longer able to invest attention and pursue its goals." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This study tells us that the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic will continue to display themselves through the loss of flow within the population for some time after the physical Government regulated restrictions have ended. This is due to the disruption of both unconscious and conscious achievements that were reached throughout daily life, resulting in rewarding emotions and therefore increasing well-being. Breaking down flow theory into its main components, we can understand how to better attain these optimal experiences which have positive results on our mental health. *"There are two main strategies we can adopt to improve the quality of life. The first is to try making external conditions match our goals. The second is to change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Applying this to the current global situation means that an individual could take up new activities and interests which would increase their flow and subsequently the rewarding emotions from achieving positive experiences. Another potential benefit could be rewiring the brains understanding of the immediate surroundings so that it is able to appreciate the situation as it stands. A popular method for maintaining optimal consciousness in the present and being able to regain peace within enjoyed activities, is the practice of Mindfulness *"Meditation is not complicated, nor is it about success or failure."* (Williams & Penman, 2011). Contrary to some beliefs within Flow theory, which suggest that there is specific criteria that must be carried out to achieve an optimal experience; Meditation focuses on bringing awareness to everyday challenges in new ways so that they are processed differently by the mind and are able to contribute to overall wellness.

As human beings in active postmodern societies, our constant awareness of our emotions are one of the things that sets us apart from other sociable living creatures. *"Take a person's emotionality away, and there's nothing left that deserves to be called "self"—no valuing, no motivation, no agency, just a colorless plain condition. Emotionality consists in a fundamental, inseparable unity of evaluation, intentionality, agency, and self-involvement."* (Scheve & Salmela, 2014). These primordial intuitions have evolved so that we are able to react and adapt accordingly to many types of situations, recently our inability to switch off from this state of high alert has become apparent. *"Let one thing be settled for our initial enquiry, which is surely evident from what was said, namely, that even after the external object of perception has gone away the sensations remain and are objects of perception."* (Aristotle & D. Miller Jr., 2018). This study further explains how the effects of stressful situations in our daily lives can negatively impact us in the long term, and the effects that these negative situations can have on our emotions and mental wellbeing. Translating this knowledge for use regarding the current effects of the pandemic could mean that; as a result of our brains processing our surroundings negatively for an extended period of time, that this could continue once said restrictions have been lifted. *"But if chronic distress in its many forms is toxic, the opposite range of emotion can be tonic – do a degree."* (Goleman, 1995). This study demonstrates the advantages that a sustained positive attitude could have. This could show results not just for the individuals directly affected by the difficulties presented by the pandemic, but also on chronic mental illness sufferers in the long term.



Figure 2

Looking back into the theory of flow and how this can be applied to the emotional human state, there is an argument against the benefits of being able to maintain an optimal mental state for a short period of time. *"Picasso enjoyed painting, but as soon as he lay down his brushes he turned into a rather unpleasant man. These and countless other examples are a reminder that having achieved flow in one activity does not necessarily guarantee that it will be carried over to the rest of life."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For 'Flow' theory to be effective, it generally requires a person to be experiencing Eudaimonia which means that they are able to grow in their individual

subjective way. Practicing mindfulness also helps to alter their perception of their own surroundings so that it is subconsciously accepted as positive. This also helps in resolving any grievances in a logical way. *"In mindfulness, we start to see the world as it is, not as we expect it to be, how we want it to be, or what we fear it might become."* (Williams & Penman, 2011). Mindful awareness has been known on its own to be capable of sufficiently reducing chronic mental illnesses. This is due to the effect that meditation has on stress, resulting in better control of our reactions to difficult situations, which ultimately improves our mental wellbeing. *"A view of human nature that ignores the power of emotions is sadly shortsighted. The very name Homo Sapiens, the thinking species, is misleading in light of the new appreciation and vision of the place of emotions in our lives that science now offers."* (Goleman, 1995). This emphasises how important, down to the most primordial level, that emotions are to our survival in modern day society. Granted, Flow theory is proven to help with achieving optimal wellbeing; but it is almost entirely practical in the sense that the individual has to be able to perform tasks which would not necessarily have been possible in the confines of a government instructed lockdown. By practicing mindful meditation the individual should be able to have a restructured view of their time under the restrictions, potentially having the effect of processing and therefore removing any underlying trauma caused.

Looking further into the connections between flow theory and creativity, we find that although the process of making is subjective to each individual, when the theories are applied they function similarly due to the very personal enjoyment people find in engaging themselves. *"Creativity involves the production of novelty. The process of discovery involved in creating something new appears to be one of the most enjoyable activities any human can be involved in."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This study also expands on how unique creating is in all manner of artistic forms and industries; people find pleasure in inventing or constructing something that they can relate to and emotionally reward themselves for the visual achievement. This mood-boosting process has applications not only as a hobby, but also potentially in acting as a therapeutic aid for reducing stress and therefore combating contributing factors that worsen mental health symptoms. *"When distractions are out of the way and the other conditions for flow are in place, the creative process acquires all the dimensions for flow."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). From this we can determine that the artistic activity and the theory of Eudaimonia, can work harmoniously to increase our general mood, which is carried over even after the process has been completed. As mentioned previously, practical design processes are subjective based on what an individual appreciates as positive artistic experiences. However, it is undeniable that everyone has the ability to apply themselves creatively. *"Schools generally fail to teach how exciting, how mesmerizingly beautiful science or mathematics can be; they teach the routine of literature or*

history rather than the adventure. It is in this sense that creative individuals live exemplary lives. They show how joyful and interesting complex symbolic activity is.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). From this we can further understand how it is not necessarily the end result of creating which is to be appreciated, but rather the artistic journey which humans should feel content in at that present time. This also significantly relates back to mindful meditation, and how it focuses on keeping us engaged in the activity that is being carried out, and less on the other potentially intrusive thoughts which may interfere with enjoyment.



Figure 3

A person’s creativity can be influenced and encouraged by many variables; but one of the most noticeable, both viscerally and in the amount of process engaged in by an individual, is the extent of control emotions can have. *“Emotions serve as inputs to creative processes by providing motivations that spur people to generate new ideas. Most creative products in science, technology, art, and social change result from conscious, intentional, goal-driven attempts to solve problems. People do not just pick any goal but rather are driven by goals that are emotionally important to them.”* (Thagard, 2019). This example tells us that although fulfilling creative processes are subjective, artistic practices being so broad means that the applications aren’t necessarily limited to

people who paint or draw. What this tells us is that perhaps society needs to redefine what creativity means to us within our jobs and hobbies, emphasising and encouraging people to express themselves creatively guided by their emotions and goals. Another form of the creative process is innovation, which involves either the design process having a practical goal of finding new methods to help resolve an issue or creating new products for a wide range of uses. *“Creative acts are not purely syntactic manipulations but require mechanisms that integrate syntax with semantics and pragmatics to produce analogies that are meaningful and useful. Creativity in science, technology, art, and social change is far from random, driven by goals such as producing an explanation, an instrument, a work of art, or a valuable social enterprise.”* (Thagard, 2019). From this we can further understand the applications that creativity has to our every-day lives, in far more ways than we immediately consider as being so. This would mean it could be possible to connect positive emotions to the process, making it an enlightening and relaxing process that would enhance Flow, encourage the methods of mindful meditation, and increase overall well-being.

From this research it can be determined that the SARS-CoV-2 global pandemic has had a subsequent negative effect on the mental well-being of the population of the United Kingdom; and likely around the world. This decline in mental health may also be having a significant impact on physical well-being which can lead to a number of diseases and slower recovery from many other illnesses. The key may well be in researching how the emotions can be tapped into using creative outputs to suit each individual, and how it can be translated to increase Flow theory in all aspects of our every-day routines. This would also prepare many people for the potentiality of another Government enforced lockdown, helping people to cope with the effects, both at home with being able to switch off from the high-alert, and when the restrictions are lifted, so that these negative emotions are not then connected to other situations in work and social life.

So my question is; How can creativity and expression be applied into our everyday lives so that it increases general well-being, and to what extent would it be able to assist in improving mental health both after the pandemic, and to assist people suffering with chronic mental health conditions?

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Figure 3 Renoir, P.-A., 1879. *Discarded Roses*.

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