

# PARTNERS IN HEALTH

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## The Power of Art on Our Mental Health

Making art is fun, whether it be drawing, painting, crafting, scrapbooking, or colouring. But did you know that making art is also good for your mental health? Increased evidence demonstrates the positive impact arts activities have on mental health and well-being. Here are just a few ways that making art can help improve mental health.

### Encourages Emotional Expression

Art is a non-verbal medium of self-expression. It allows us to express how we are feeling when words alone aren't enough, or when we don't feel like talking. For instance, some might draw a face to show how they feel on the inside, and others might paint abstract shapes to represent how they would like to feel. Making art can also help us process and understand our emotions in a safe way.

### Reduces Cortisol, Increases Dopamine

According to some studies, making art can promote relaxation and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol. As well, some studies have shown that making art can increase dopamine levels in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of pleasure and reward. An increase in dopamine can be beneficial for people struggling with poor mental health.

### Provides Opportunities for Mindfulness

Mindfulness is about being present in each moment, without judgement, and it is associated with stress reduction. Focusing on the task of making art can be viewed as an opportunity to practice mindfulness. How does the brush feel as it moves across the canvas? Can you focus on the sensation of the clay in your hands when you sculpt? Are you able to stay focused on the craft you are making, without being distracted by thoughts or worries? These are just some examples of how making art can foster mindfulness.



## There are many ways to make art !

*Common art experiences are painting, drawing, scrapbooking, or sketching; or you may be interested in graphic art, photography, or sculpture. If visual arts aren't for you, you can also engage in writing, drama, dance, or music. Whatever medium you choose, engaging in an arts activity can be rewarding and beneficial to your mental health and wellbeing. Best of all there is no right or wrong way to make art – it is the process, not the outcome, that is important.*

*Written by Gabrielle Lesage*

*Source:*

*<https://amiquebec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AMI-NL-Spring-2021.pdf>*

## Facilitates Social Connections

Whether you are creating art with others in a class, or you are at home crafting with friends and family, making art with others can provide opportunities for social interactions—even virtually. Creating connections with people who share similar interests can decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation.

## Thinking VS. Experiencing

Kabat-Zinn distinguishes two modes of attention: a doing mode and a mindful mode. One is not better or worse than the other; they are simply different ways of engaging with our worlds.

A doing mode is our natural way of paying attention; it is automatic and habitual. We are concerned with how things should be rather than how they actually are. In a doing mode, we engage with our experiences intellectually, filtering our experiences through critical thinking and analysis; thus, we are continually evaluating and judging our experiences. In a doing mode, we are goal-oriented and focused on fixing problems or achieving results. On the other hand, a mindful mode does not come naturally to us. It is a learned way of paying attention that is intentional and cultivated; in other words, we have to choose to be mindful and practice being mindful. Instead of thinking about our experiences, we engage with our world directly, using our body senses, emotions, and intuition. We observe our experiences, thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations with detachment; in other words, without judging them as good or bad. We experience things as they are, not what we think they should be.

To better understand the distinction between our typical way of paying attention (doing mode) and a mindful way (mindful mode), consider the everyday experience of eating a snack. In a doing mode, you might feel your stomach rumbling, judge that feeling to be bad and unpleasant, grab whatever food is close, and eat the food without noticing much about it. The goal: to make your unpleasant feeling of hunger go away.

However, in a mindful mode, you might feel your stomach rumbling, observe the sensation for a few moments, name that observation as “hunger,” intentionally choose a snack, and notice each aspect of the sensory experience of eating that snack: the look of the label; the feel of the package in your hand; the smell, colour, and shape of the food; the sound it makes when you eat it; and, of course, its taste. You may observe that your stomach no longer rumbles once you finish. Being hungry is not judged to be good or bad or a problem to be solved.

## Mindfulness

It is a term that we hear often, but what does it mean? Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness is not about paying more attention to each moment but changing how we pay attention, according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., a world-renowned expert in the art of mindfulness.



## Mindfulness Techniques

So, how do we switch from being in a doing mode to being in a mindful mode? Our minds will naturally desire to judge, attain goals, and analyze our experiences. In a mindful mode, we don't fight this instinct, but we choose to engage with our perceptions differently. To do this, we have to train ourselves using some simple techniques and exercises. Remember, always consult with your health-care provider before beginning any new health-care practice.

One mindfulness technique is to observe your sensory experiences during routine activities. For instance, instead of rushing through the dishes to “get it done,” you might take time to feel the soapy water on your hands, notice the smell of the detergent, and observe the sparkle of clean plates once you've finished.

Another technique is to observe physical sensations inside your body. One way to do this is to set aside a few minutes each day to sit quietly and observe the breath in your body without controlling it.

As you practice being in a mindful mode, you may notice your mind wandering, with memories of the day, thoughts about the future, or even emotional responses distracting you from your sensory perceptions. Instead of judging or reacting to these thoughts and feelings, you can simply notice the thought and label it as “thinking,” “worrying,” “judging,” or “remembering”. Then return your attention to whatever you are doing.



## Getting Better My Way (digital tool )

**Getting Better My Way is a digital self-management tool for emotional health. If you are experiencing difficulties due to stress, anxiety or distress, the tool can help improve your well-being by identifying practical actions for you to put in place that are tailor made for your situation. Since you know yourself better than anyone else, you can pursue your goals at your pace, making your own choices and relying on your strengths. Note that the tool is not a substitute for conventional therapy such as individual or group sessions with a professional. For more information, visit the [www.gettingbettermyway.ca](http://www.gettingbettermyway.ca) website.**



## Is Mindfulness Right for Me ?

Research has demonstrated numerous psychological and health benefits of mindfulness practice, including:

- Reduced stress
- Increased positive feelings
- Decreased negative emotions
- Reduced anxiety, depression, and somatic distress
- Improved immune functioning

Mindfulness is about choice: it provides an alternative way to engage with the world. If you think that you might benefit from incorporating mindfulness techniques into your life, visit [amiquebec.org/](http://amiquebec.org/) sources for links to other articles about mindfulness, pick up one of Jon Kabat-Zinn's books, such as *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*, and talk with your health-care provider to see if mindfulness is right for you.

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