

Arts and Culture as a Source of Well-being

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Established medical practitioner Dr Wong Tien Hua explores the many ways in which arts and culture contribute to the well-being of individuals and the society at large, particularly in times of crises as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than being a non-essential sector, the author argues that arts and culture are crucial to the resilience of communities.

What is well-being?

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization 2021). This idea of completeness in one’s well-being instead of merely being free from disease is an important one, because it reminds us that health extends beyond existing biomedical models.

As medical science and diagnostics advance, and our understanding of disease pathology expands, we continue to add new definitions and symptom complexes to our growing list of illnesses. Indeed, it is becoming harder, if not impossible, for anyone to be really “free” of any disease. The goal of being completely healthy is seemingly unattainable.

Perhaps a better way of thinking about well-being is to regard it as a dynamic state that needs to be balanced, and the presence of mental or physical illnesses as something that cannot be eradicated but instead needs to be managed.

This is where the concept of resilience comes in. Resilience is the ability to adapt well and recover quickly in the face of adversity such as existential threats, illnesses and great stress. Increasing

resilience is contextual, based on the individual and involves the process of coping with stress, finding meaning, taking control, connecting with others, and contributing to a common cause.

In this article I will show how arts and culture can be an important pillar in building resilience and how it is integral to the well-being of not just individuals but to society as a whole.

COVID-19 and its impact on well-being

Since early 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt in all sectors of Singapore society. From hawkers to hotels, from airline workers to arts freelancers—no one has been spared its devastating effects. As the virus goes through stages of mutation making it more transmissible, clusters of infection continue to spring up leading to cycles of restrictions and easing.

The immediate economic impact arising from COVID-19 was a direct result of lockdowns and travel bans, leading to failed businesses and closures, reduced income, and job losses, especially in industries reliant on tourism and the congregation of people. Tourism, hospitality, and retail were the first to feel the effects; arts events such as exhibitions, plays, and concerts were also not spared. Like a tsunami, the seismic shifts in the way the economy had to adapt to the unfolding pandemic led to a delayed wave of economic woes in almost all other sectors.

Imposition of movement restrictions and social distancing resulted in cessation of physical gatherings, with group sizes reduced to between two to five persons. The population was asked to

stay home, adults had to work from home, and students had home-based learning. Extended families were separated and could not meet up, particularly affecting families with loved ones based overseas. Many people had to undergo enforced Stay-Home Notices and Quarantine Orders¹. This kind of isolation is not only physical but social as well, and its impact on well-being cannot be underestimated. Social connections and a sense of belonging are fundamental human needs. The deprivation of human connection leads to social isolation, and can have negative consequences such as anxiety, frustration, and depression. Isolation is also linked to physical inactivity and this leads to increased risk of chronic illnesses.

Many of us would have experienced the psychological effects of the pandemic, from the initial fear and anxiety of a threat from a novel new virus when the first cases were reported in Singapore, to uncertainty and fatigue as the pandemic wore on, stretching from weeks to months. For those whose jobs and income were affected, the psychological consequences include anxiety, loss of self-worth, helplessness, and depression. A *Straits Times* poll of 1000 people reported on 7 April 2021 had 36% of respondents saying their mental health has worsened.

Finally, there is the social impact of the pandemic, as families are forced to live, work, and study in the confines of small spaces. There is a loss of personal space and freedom of movement, leading to disruption and disputes. All these are evident as we see increasing cases of domestic violence and abuse being reported in the local newspapers. Frustration and anger can turn into aggression, and build intolerance towards others especially amongst people from different cultures, threatening the social fabric of our communities (Chan D 2020).

What is the evidence of arts and culture on well-being?

Doctors know that well-being does not fall under the domain of healthcare services alone. The successful treatment of any patient's illness goes beyond medical management and has to be contextualised to the individual's circumstances, taking into account lifestyle, family, and cultural factors. Attaining well-being is thus a multidimensional effort in which the arts and culture have a big role to play. If the arts can be shown to have positive health effects, then it is a useful adjunct to medicine in its ability to reach each and every person in a personal way, based on each individual's preferences and cultural milieu.

There are innumerable studies that link arts and culture to both mental and physical well-being. Artistic engagement either as an observer participant, or as part of a creative activity, can enhance mood and emotion thereby combating stress, anxiety, and depression.

The World Health Organization published a scoping review in 2019 covering over 900 publications involving over 3,000 studies looking at how the arts can improve health and well-being (Fancourt and Finn 2019).

The authors defined the arts in five broad categories, including performing arts, visual arts, literature, cultural activities, and online/digital arts. Arts activities are linked to health because they involve aesthetic engagement and sensory activation, stimulate cognition and emotion,

and oftentimes require social interaction and physical activity. These activities are able to trigger psychological, physiological, social, and behavioural responses that can lead to positive health outcomes.

The studies show that people who engage with the arts are more likely to lead healthier lives. Arts that involve physical activity such as dance lead to improvements in cardiovascular health and a reduction in body fat and obesity. Dance promotes good posture, improves strength and balance, thereby reducing falls and preventing frailty in the elderly. Engaging in the arts improves mental well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and self-worth. Composing and listening to music, creating artworks, and visiting cultural sites are all relaxing activities that reduce stress and anxiety.

Cultural activities such as attending concerts and visiting museums help the brain's resilience against cognitive decline as a result of ageing. Arts have a role in health promotion, health education, and can reduce social stigma when they tackle health-related themes such as mental health, dementia, and HIV.

Arts and culture in the times of COVID-19

Given the substantial body of evidence on the health benefits of the arts, I would like to highlight three areas where the arts has a direct effect on well-being in Singapore, and why the arts should be regarded as a necessary and essential form of support in a time of crisis.

Art as an Expression of Gratitude

The current pandemic has thrust the country into a deep crisis where no person is left unscathed. Our society has collectively gone through an extremely trying period marked by anxiety and uncertainty as we struggle to navigate the storm. It is as if we are sailing a ship in turbulent waters, being tossed around by events that we cannot control.

Art has the power to remind us that we are not alone in this suffering and it offers an avenue to process our emotions and experiences. We often feel helpless in events beyond our control, but we can regain that sense of self-determination through the process of creating art, in particular by using art to show our appreciation and gratitude to others. Being grateful enhances happiness and positive emotions, and expressing them to others improves social connections. Creating artworks as a show of gratitude therefore is not only a process that is therapeutic to the artist, but also benefits the receiving party at the same time. This double effect improves well-being all around.

One example of utilising art as an expression of gratitude is the "Healthcare Heroes" initiative which was started to allow members of the public to submit artworks to thank frontline workers, some of whom had experienced discrimination during the early stages of the pandemic. The website healthcareheroes.sg showcases a large collection of artworks where one can see and experience the outpouring of gratitude and thanks for frontline workers who have been working tirelessly to ensure the safety of the nation.

Combating Isolation

Arts and cultural activities can be used as a potent tool in combating isolation. Arts activities encourage participation; exhibitions and concerts provide venues for people to interact and can serve to connect family members and social groups. For example, outdoor public exhibitions can be enjoyed by both young and old alike and are therefore an ideal activity for extended families to attend, while arts activities held in healthcare institutions are able to connect patients with carers. The imposition of public health measures necessitated the closure of many arts programmes in the past year, and it is hoped that such activities can be quickly restarted once the country has achieved a high level of vaccination and is able to open up safely.

The "Arts in Your Neighbourhood" programme, an initiative by National Arts Council, is a good example of bringing the arts to the community. It is held twice a year in different neighbourhoods around the island, and includes a host of activities covering dance, literary arts, music, theatre and visual arts, encouraging families, the young and old in the community to get engaged without having to travel far from their homes.

Strengthening Social Bonds

The arts and culture foster prosocial behavior, and in particular the use of music and songs has shown to enhance social bonding. Music reflects and preserves cultural traditions, thereby promoting identity and resilience. Through the singing of familiar songs, participants share their common experiences and hopes for the future, transcending ethnic and cultural boundaries.

As I write this article during the National Day weekend in August, I am reminded of the National Day songs that Singaporeans look forward to every year.

This year's song is entitled "The Road Ahead" and eloquently captures the difficulties the nation has faced in the past year. The lyrics remind us of the power of hope:

*It's always darkest just before the dawn.
See this island, every grain of sand
Hear this anthem, it's the voices of our friends
Come whatever on the road ahead
We did it before, and we'll do it again* □

About the Author



Dr Wong Tien Hua is a Family Medicine Practitioner and director of Mutual Healthcare Pte Ltd. He is a council member of the Singapore Medical Association (SMA), and has been serving in SMA since 2004. He was President of SMA from April 2015 to April 2018 and served as Chairman of the Medical Associations of South East Nations (MASEAN) from 2014 to 2016. He is currently also a board member at Bright Vision Hospital and a council member for Agency for Care Effectiveness (ACE). He was appointed as a council member on the National Arts Council in September 2019.

Dr Wong has been Vice President of the College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS) since 2019, and serves as the programme director for the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine (GDFM) Programme. He also teaches as an adjunct assistant professor in Family Medicine at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

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Notes:

1. Stay-Home Notices are legal notices requiring travellers to remain in their places of residence or dedicated facilities for a stipulated period. Quarantine Orders are issued to individuals who are, or suspected to be, carriers of the COVID-19 virus.