

Arts therapies: scientific perspectives and clinical prospects

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The evolution of the human race is inextricably intertwined with symbolic, aesthetic and creative phenomena – shortly, the arts, which are not only a vivid expression of cultural dynamics, but have also been serving as curative media for time immemorial.

Today's clinical circles and public health systems apply the arts in form of, e.g., music therapy or dance therapy – or they use holistic approaches such as Sound Work, Orff music therapy or Intermodal Expressive Therapy. In medicine, arts therapies are used in disciplines such as neuro-rehabilitation, paediatrics, psychiatry, geriatrics, psycho-oncology and obstetrics, while specific arts therapeutic models are precisely tailored to distinct medical conditions such as acquired brain injury, autism spectrum disorder, eating disorders, schizophrenia or Alzheimer's dementia.

Clinical benefits call for research on underlying mechanisms, in other words: Why and how can arts alleviate symptoms or (help to) cure diseases? In this context, one of the most important support comes from neurosciences. By way of illustration, music is a vital promotor of neuroplasticity, which is important for psychotherapeutic changes or the regeneration of affected neural networks. Moreover, the arts can importantly stimulate the default mode network, an enormous information processing system, which is, however, not accessible to our conscious mind. Arts-based therapies also have a strong impact on the limbic system, which generates and modulates emotions, and even can boost the activity of the nucleus accumbens, the brain's 'joy centre', hence its importance in mood disorders such as depression.

However, neurosciences are only one approach to explore the mechanisms underlying the therapeutic effect of the arts. Recent activities also involve quantum consciousness and quantum spirit, as well as cross-cultural and culturally sensitive medicine, e.g. traditional Chinese medicine or shamanistic rituals and associated myths. Arts-based therapies are likely to have a flourishing future, and interdisciplinary research is needed to get deeper insights into their complex dynamics, as well as to optimise their multifaceted methods.