



Why Creative Arts For Transformation?

The Research Loves This Way of Working.

By Shannon Simonelli Ph.D., ATR

Creativity and the arts have been valued by tribal peoples, folk culture and developing societies throughout recorded history. They touch the heart, spark the mind, illuminate the Soul and invoke the Sacred. They also heal the community as well as the body, mind and Spirit. Making art, dancing, music and writing, we now know, also build the brain and cultivate outcomes that may save our lives. This white paper positions the creative arts as a transformative tool to connect participants to deeper meaning in work and life.

Let's look at a summary of key points in the research from Harvard Medical School, National Institute of Health, The American Journal of Public Health, Business Insider, The Creative Brain and more; to see what the experts say. You will find links throughout this summary.



Creativity & Imagination

Dr. David Eagleman's research on the Creative Brain [click here](#) shows humans as uniquely positioned to be creative. Humans have a pre-frontal cortex which is the seat of human imagination. This allows us to imagine - to unhook from present place and time and try out new ideas. With our imagination, we literally call into 'form' things that don't exist yet. We take things we know and apply it in new contexts or take in new information and apply it to what we already know. Allowing for innovation, breaking up traditional ways of doing and seeing and reconfiguring information into original new forms.

The creative brain requires us to intentionally, even joyfully, embrace failure potential. Ironically, to ensure our survival, the brain takes the easiest way, the path of least resistance and limited failure potential. Yet, our survival depends on our creativity, new learning and innovation. Creativity requires us to go beyond our survival brain, what we have always done, and asks us to take risks. To step out of the comfort zone, try something new, and be surprised by what's discovered. Our survival depends on this creative innovation.

“Being involved in creative process is transformative” -

The Creative Brain

Creative expression brings healing, order and new meaning:

- According to Creative Brain Prisoners are less likely to reoffend when involved with creative expression
- Emotional writing decreases viral load and increases immune response in HIV patients [click here](#)
- Trauma writing and Expressive writing decreases pain, anxiety, depression, fatigue [click here](#)

In other words, with the creative arts we can literally create our futures differently, we can impact our bodies all the way down to our cellular function. We can minimize negative health outcomes and improve positive outcomes in our whole being.



Mindful movement, social dance & music

There is nothing like moving with a group of people. We seem to have it in our blood. We know about being part of a moving body from a primal place. We can unlock the playful power of moving together when we bring awareness to this basic human experience, without judgement and with full permission to try something new. Through inviting greater awareness in the body and inviting greater range of movements in the dance, participants brain's apply this new learning and begin to experience an increased range of movement potential and perceived options in daily life (Casasanto, D. 2012).

We know that novelty and exercise impacts neural plasticity by generating more brain cells in the hippocampus (Reynolds, G. 2012). Free form dance and movement with a group invites spontaneous situations where decisions are made in the moment. Movement direction or quality may shift on a dime.

Dancing increases dopamine, a feel good neurotransmitter, and triggers GABA states of peace and calm. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated with dance, indicating we are in a restful state rather than hyper arousal or 'trauma brain'. We have access to Higher Mind in this state. We are moving in a neural cocktail of joy, pleasure and enjoyment [click here](#)

The National Institute of Health's National Center for Biotechnology Information did a study called

Enhancement of Pleasure During Spontaneous Dance (2017) here is what they found [click here](#)

- The combination of movement and music during dance results in a distinct state characterized by acutely heightened pleasure [click here](#)
- Music used in dance is found to calm neural activity, decrease anxiety and increase immune function [click](#)
- Parasympathetic-related heart rate variability (HRV) increased during dance - protective against depression, heart attack, anxiety [click](#)

Research also tells us:

- Dance protects memory and reduces risk of dementia [click](#)
- Mindful movement expands consciousness, helping identify meaning in relationship to others, the self, and Spirit. Helps identify and work through challenges of loss, illness and threats to connective relationships [click](#)



Art making

Art making as part of a group experience invites time for reflection and discovery. Putting color to the page captures and illuminates the emotions and sensations that arise. Art making can open awareness to things right below the surface that elude words and even conscious thought. Expressing these discoveries brings deeper meaning to all that is being explored.

According to the Utah Art Therapy association's Legislative Brief, Art therapy may be used to reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, mindfulness and well-being, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, resolve trauma and increase self-esteem.

According to the National Institute of Health's literature review: The Connection Between Art, Healing and Public Health click Art making:

- Improved well-being by decreasing negative emotions and increasing positive ones
- Improved medical outcomes, trends toward reduced depression
- Reduced stress and anxiety; increased positive emotions
- Induced the reconstruction of positive identity
- Reduced cortisol levels (stress hormone)

Creative expression links to greater indicators of wellness for people with cancer, depression, anxiety, and dementia - it's reasonable to imagine everyone who engages with the arts for transformation enjoys these benefits too.

What about the Heart?

Although much focus is on the brain, there is interesting research on the heart and its synergy with the creative arts for healing and innovation.

“Heart rate variability research (McCraty, R. et al, 2006) tells us to focus on the rhythm of the heart as a powerhouse for changing the limbic response of stress and trauma formations in the brain and body response system. The field of neurocardiology studies the neuron pathways in the heart itself. The brain is traditionally seen as sending all information out to the heart and other parts of the body. What is now known is that the heart also sends abundant messages to the brain (Wilson, 2008). When people are in ‘high frequency’ or highly resonant feeling states (gratitude, appreciation, compassion, love, enjoyment) they are activating the powerhouse of electromagnetic frequency in their coherent heart rate variability – the heart is sending high



power communication to the brain. This is stimulated with the imagination and movement. Positively impacting physiological functions including brain processes and psychological/behavioral outcomes. In short, people who intentionally generate and practice being in more positive emotional states use the power of movement, imagination and heart to change their brain and experience less stress, greater mental clarity, sustained positive states and greater emotional stability.” (McCraty, R. et al, 2006). “ S. Simonelli click

In summary

Creating enjoyment and expression through the arts brings healing and innovation throughout an individual’s whole system. Teams and group systems also experience the transformation in the following ways:

- Lower stress and trauma response
- Minimize distress quickly
- Increase brain and heart coherence
- Quiet and regulate over-active/reactive emotions
- Increase ability to access higher cortical function and creative mind
- Innovation and creative outcomes not previously in existence - new products and processes
- Increase mindfulness and body based emotional awareness to better regulate trauma, anxiety, burnout, stress
- Increase perception of possibility
- Increase self-worth and social connectedness
- Build self-esteem, a stronger sense of identity and self-competence
- Build tolerance for differences
- Build congruence between inner and outer worlds
- Decrease anxiety, agitation, and tension
- Experience coping strategies available to choose in daily life



About Shannon Simonelli Ph.D.

Shannon's passion for transformation and experiential work is a life long affair. She has been a creative day dreamer and mover her entire life. She remembers dancing to American Bandstand and Soul Train as early as 3 years old and regularly getting in trouble for her transporting imagination.

Shannon has invested thousands of hours in her own development and discovery related to how we learn, grow and change. She is masterful at both creating engaging learning experiences and in facilitating individuals and groups to grasp depth of experience in personal and professionally transformational ways. She shows you how to take the experience you have into your every day life and make a difference in your world.

- 20 years of award winning private practice as a Ph.D. in Imaginal Psychology and Creative Arts Therapy (Best Psychotherapist Honolulu 2008, 2009, Best Creative Arts Therapist Holladay Ut 2018, 2019, 2020)
- Founding partner at The NeuroImaginal Institute, Creator of the Luminous Life Maps system, Founder of CreativeWell Consulting and winner of the Women in Business Entrepreneur of the Year, 2017
- Department Director - Expressive Therapies - University Neuropsychiatric Institute, Premiere Psychiatric Hospital Salt Lake City, Ut. 2009- 2012
- Masters level faculty, Chaminade University, Honolulu, HI 2000 - 2010

Sparked? Lets Talk

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Or <https://www.schedulicity.com/scheduling/LLMWVS>

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