

Art for healthy ageing



There are many ways to engage with art, and many reasons to do so. Painting is one way to do art, but far from the only. And whichever way you do it, it's good for you. Creative activities stimulate your brain. This increases neuroplasticity and thinking skills.

Painting may sound like a simple task, but this activity has many demands on your body and mind. Therefore, it has many health benefits.

Here are a few ways your healthy ageing journey can benefit from both the making and appreciating of art.



Why should you stay involved with art as you age?

Making art to keep active

If you have limited mobility, painting can be one way to stay active and involved. Handling paint, moving a brush around, and interacting with the canvas can all be useful as low-impact gentle movements. This helps your joint mobility and fine motor skills.

Similar things can be said of other art forms that require the use of your hands, like sculpting or knitting. Keeping your joints in regular use helps to keep them limber. Of course, be careful in your movements, and rest your hands if they feel strained.

You can also try these [hand exercises](#) or [therapy dough](#). Check with a health professional if you're unsure if these exercises are for you.

Art reduces stress

A [2016 study](#) showed that spending 45 minutes creating art can lower your cortisol levels. This means painting could decrease the amount of stress in your body. And this happens regardless of your artistic skill level.

But reducing stress has more benefits than you might realise.

As stress is known to [impede the immune system](#), research suggests that the inverse may be true as well. In other words, positive emotions may boost your immune system.

Boosting your immune system

Experiencing positive emotions is associated with healthier levels of cytokines, [according to a 2015 study](#). This would indicate a happier immune system. And this association especially applies to awe, such as you might experience from art or nature.

And here's another interesting thing. [In a 2004 study](#), daily emotional writing was shown to boost the immune system in immunodeficient people. Emotional writing, in particular, more than neutral writing.

It seems like doing things that make you feel good might just be good for you, after all.



Building your cognitive reserve

Many studies support that if you keep using your brain, it works better for longer. Frequent mental exercise helps you build a [reserve of thinking ability](#). This then makes you more resilient to age-related changes.

Making art stimulates both sides of your brain, in many areas at the same time. There's complex neural activity involved. Which means you can build cognitive reserve by taking up a hobby like painting.

And it's never too early or too late to start building your cognitive reserve.

Art and dementia

Artistic skill and creativity are supported by wide brain areas. ([According to a 2010 study.](#)) So, these abilities are greatly resistant to brain damage. Which means the benefits of art are also available to people with [dementia](#).

In fact, [visual art enhances memory and attention in people with dementia](#). It also helps intellectual engagement and learning.

Doing art [sharpens the capacity of the senses](#). And it may help people with dementia to act more like themselves.

For your happiness

Art can also have benefits for your emotional and social wellness. It provides the opportunity to express emotions that might be difficult to communicate. And it can provide catharsis.

So, painting could help you release negative emotions by letting you explore, confront and express them. This can alleviate depression and anxiety.

It can also help you [stay connected with your community](#). You might feel better understood through your art. And you might make friends with similar interests by joining a painting or crafting club. You can check [your local library](#) for these.

Challenging yourself

When you create art, you challenge yourself. You solve problems as you go.

You figure out ways to represent 3D objects on a flat canvas, for example. Or to express the feelings you can't find words for.

Challenging yourself like this on a regular basis promotes a mindset of growth. This helps you to approach new skills without shame. Rather, with the intention of learning.

[Learn about the importance of lifelong learning to your health and happiness.](#)

So, how can you keep doing art as you age?

How to paint with arthritis

Do you have wrist, finger, or thumb pain from osteoarthritis?

It's important to keep moving to [strengthen your muscles and reduce joint pain](#). And painting could be a way to keep your hands moving. An occupational therapist can help you find methods of doing this that suit your body best.

Here are some things to consider.

- **How do you move your brush?** Perhaps try a method that relies on movement in your shoulder and elbow rather than small movements of your wrist and fingers.
- **How do you hold your brush?** Pinch grip is when you hold something between your finger and thumb. If using pinch grip, make the shape of an O, not a D. This means make sure your thumb is curled rather than straight. It reduces the load on your thumb joints. (Brushes with thicker handles are also easier to hold and place less stress on your joints than brushes with very thin or small handles.)
- **Could a wrist brace, compression glove, or kinesiology tape help you?** This might make gripping a brush easier.
- **Are you taking breaks?** Remember to put the brush down for a moment every 5-10 minutes. Let your gripping muscles and thumb joints rest. This would also be a great time to try some gentle [hand stretches](#).

Adapt your art supplies

Choose the materials that work best for you. If brushes aren't working for you, what about sponge painting? Have you tried charcoal? Maybe you'd rather sculpt clay, or make a collage.

You might be able to attach your brush to a wrist brace and eliminate the need to grip at all. Or you can try adapting your brushes to make them easier to use. You can build up their width to alleviate the force on your thumb joint.

Slide on rubber grips or wrap elastic bands around the handle to make your brushes easier to grip. You could wrap gauze or modelling clay around your brush to mould it into your desired shape. Or make a large spherical grip by [sticking your brush through a hole in a tennis ball](#) or stress ball.

Finding adaptive tool ideas

You can find many [assistive products for craft activities](#). But it can be hard to find the exact equipment you need from Australian retailers. Still, you can look online for some great ideas on how to make your own. Also ask an occupational therapist for advice.

[Here are some examples](#) of various grip types to try replicating. You can engage the spherical, cylindrical, or hook grips. These are all more powerful and easier on the thumb than pinch grip.

Here's one example of a [grip-free paintbrush](#). You could make something like it by attaching a handle perpendicular to your brush. You might create a cylindrical grip this way too.

Use tools that make art comfortable

If you're painting at a desk, consider using small easels or inclined surfaces to relieve strain on your neck.

Maybe you enjoy sitting on the ground and painting outside. Sitting on a soft mat might be gentler on your joints.

Use cushions and supports wherever you need. It can help you to keep making art for longer periods of time.

Art and vision impairment

If you have low or deteriorating vision, it might help to go big for your canvas and brush. Reduce eyestrain to [look after your eyes](#). Or you could create other forms of art like music, sculpture, or crochet.

Consider visiting installation art exhibits, like [Sculpture by the Sea](#). These can offer a rich experience of smells, sounds, and textures, as well as larger and easier-to-see sights. Tactile art tours are also available in many galleries and museums on request. For example, the WA Maritime Museum's [Please Touch: Tactile Tour](#).

Art is still available to those with no vision. You can read case studies describing various methods and benefits of art therapy for people who are blind [here](#).

Measuring up with low vision

You can also learn about talented [AT mentor Glenn Wilson](#), who doesn't let low vision limit his craftsmanship. Glenn uses assistive products to keep crafting toys for his grandchildren. You can get advice about assistive product solutions from people like Glenn at [AT Chat](#).

Susan Oxenham is another inspirational artist with vision impairment. She used an adaptive painting technique to document the movement of her white cane by taping a paintbrush and paint to the end of it.

[Learn more about Susan here.](#)

More helpful information

If you need more information, take the [LiveUp quiz](#) or get in touch with one of our helpful team on **1800 951 971**.

Do you have some art you want to share with the world? Why not enter in the [AMCS Art Against Ageism Competition?](#) Browse last year's highlights [here](#).

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