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# Museums as Change Agents: Supporting the Chronic Illness Community

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# Museums as Change Agents: Supporting the Chronic Illness Community

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**Keywords** Chronic Illness; Health; Access; Inclusion

**Abstract** As agents of change, museums have the opportunity to act as sites of intervention for the wellness community. As museums worldwide work to expand their access and ability inclusion programs, it is important to consider the invisible illness community who may not be easily defined, but needs resources and social opportunities just the same as any other audience. Museums offer a reprieve from a clinical environment while also providing unique social cohesion experiences that will engage the chronic illness communities in activities not centered on a disease model. Instead, museums provide relief for chronic illness patients in the sense that members are given influence over how they are seen by others and through validating feelings of contribution to the community while exploring incredible collections of art.

**About the Author** Skylar Brennan is an interdisciplinary artist, access and inclusion advocate, and educator. As the current Coordinator for Teen Programs at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Brennan works with an incredible Education team and Manager, Teen Programs, Brent Bellew, to run the Teen Council, New Dimensions workshops, the Summer Teen Guide Program, and Photography Scholars program. As an educator in the arts, Brennan views teaching as an opportunity for inquiry, collaboration, and expression. She strives to combine creative thinking with empathy and create a classroom space that fosters a sense of agency for students. Skylar has a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and is working to receive her certificate in Therapeutic Recreation from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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As sites of intervention, art museums implement change. Traditionally seen solely as community art resources, museums are now taking an active role in the physical healing process of its patrons. Therefore, the museum definition can be expanded to include the addition of wellness spaces. Collaboration between the cultural heritage sector and the public healthcare sector via museums has the potential for massive public outreach, due to the inclusive nature of museum programming. While conversation regarding the changing role of museums often refers to social justice practices, museums can – and should – also serve as therapeutic or healing spaces in order to promote wellness.

This article focuses on art museums as change agents for the chronic-illness community. The challenge of well-being for those suffering from chronic pain or illness lies in the fact that there is no identified cure, nor is there one pathway for a successful recovery. Chronic pain is unique to each individual, often inconsistent, and triggered by both internal and external stressors.

However, disruption of pain cycles can take on many forms, and art museum programs can offer chronic pain sufferers a much needed and healing diversion.

Throughout history, visual art played a vital role in the healing process. For instance, in the medieval age caring for the sick was often the domain of the church, and churches were embellished with spiritual and devotional works of art intended to soothe and uplift patients.<sup>1</sup> The connection between visual art and wellness continues today. Contemporary culture has shown an increased global awareness that art can humanize medical settings and alleviate the harshness of clinics. For example, Art Rx is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help children heal through the extraordinary power of visual art. Art Rx commissions contemporary artists to transform sterile healthcare facilities into engaging and inspiring environments.<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, the New Economics Foundation defines well-being as “the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going, through the interaction between their circumstances, activities, and psychological resources or mental capital.”<sup>4</sup> The correlation between social connection and health and well-being is vitally important. People’s social experiences, or the degree to which they have supportive relationships and a sense of connection with others, are an essential aspect of their well-being. Opportunities for social activities, such as those offered by art museums, increase self-worth. Such opportunities also empower people with chronic illness to manage how they are seen by others while fostering feelings of community contribution. Medical expertise can diagnose but unfortunately, does little to prevent or relieve the stress of chronic disease. Art museums can be a healing tool for communities working toward relieving the stress of chronic illness.

The public continues to expand its notion of what museum outreach and engagement opportunities look like, both on a local and national level; therefore, new resources must be tapped. As art museums strive to be more inclusive and accessible to all people, the onus must be on the museum to make their purpose and mission clear and relevant to the public. Not only can museums invite new audiences in order to foster change, but museums can also become sites of intervention by co-creating experiences for diverse audiences. Leveraging the fact that museums have ample space, unique programming, and a variety of learning materials, audiences can initiate need-based experiences. Community engagement is a driving force behind museum programming, and the innate human need to connect with others in shared experiences motivates participation within public institutions. By providing immersive, experimental, and accessible programming, museums can allow for more expansive integration of diverse communities, including the chronic illness community.

Museums consist of diverse spaces and multiple meanings. In addition to a welcoming space, an educational resource, and a community center, museums are now starting to embrace the idea of becoming a wellness space, or places that improve the physical, psychological, and/or emotional state of visitors. Acting as change agents, museums are offering something new to the public. Art as therapy has existed for some time, but museums as therapeutic spaces offer an innovative way to experience wellness. Healing does not have to be defined by sanitation masks, lab coats, and clinical environments. Healing can take place in galleries where walls

are covered in masterpieces, and spaces are filled with patrons from all backgrounds. Museums are a place for the sick. Museums are a place for the healthy. Most importantly, museums are a place for healing. Whether you are learning about art or yourself, there is room to experience the healing power that museums hold.

The United States leads the world in recognizing the value of museums to health and well-being. For example, the national initiative “Let’s Move! Museums and Gardens,” led by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and launched by Michelle Obama, is dedicated to solving the problem of childhood obesity.<sup>5</sup> There has also been growth in established museum programs for communities with dementia such as the Museum of Modern Art’s “Meet Me” initiative<sup>6</sup> and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art’s “Minds in Motion” tour.<sup>7</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, as well as other museums, also offer low-sensory experiences in the mornings, allowing neuro-diverse communities their own intimate experience with the museum.<sup>8</sup> Various other art museum programs exist aimed at aiding eating disorder communities, grieving communities, and communities suffering from depression. Placing art museum programs at the heart of tackling health and well-being challenges provides a way to value the contribution culture makes to improvements in wellness.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have recognized the beneficial aspects of the relationship between health, wellness, visual art, and museum spaces. For example, in her book *The Social Work of Museums*, Lois H. Silverman argues that museums contribute to the pursuit of health in five major ways: by promoting relaxation; changing physiology and emotions in an immediate and beneficial way; encouraging introspection; fostering health education; and advocating for public health and enhancing healthcare environments.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Professor Sir Michael Marmot contended in 2008 that, “social networks and local communities strongly influence individual health and well-being, and, further, that the extent to which people are able to participate in society and control their own lives makes a critical contribution to psychosocial well-being and health.”<sup>11</sup> Knowing the positive relationship between social participation and well-being, it is important to consider the social roles possible in art museums, such as reinforcing a sense of connection to others, which is particularly important for those experiencing chronic pain.

Although social-based interventions for pain are uncommon, museums operating as social spaces are not.<sup>12</sup> Merging these two ideas creates an opportunity for new audiences to have a meaningful experience in a museum space with lasting effects for well-being. Art museums can create a shift from a ‘disease model’ to one that enables individuals to improve their quality of life by providing the space to interact with others and art, away from clinical settings.<sup>13</sup> This builds on Stephen Kaplan’s concept of “mental restoration,” which suggests that recovery from mental exhaustion can be brought about by physical removal from one’s everyday environment and introduction to an activity so fascinating that it leads to effortless engagement.<sup>14</sup> Museums are the perfect platform for this form of mental restoration. Large, open spaces filled with immersive and sensory experiences offer a reprieve from diagnosis fixation.

Social prescribing initiatives, or the act of health professionals referring patients to the community, to connect to a range of local, non-clinical services in order to improve health and well-being, are becoming more common. Museums are an ideal asset in social prescribing initiatives and expanding this concept to the chronic-illness community furthers museums’



outreach programming and inclusivity efforts. Parallels also exist between social prescribing initiatives and the social return on investment model (SROI), which relates to the measurement and evaluation of non-financial values such as social, environmental, and economic factors. Like SROI, social prescribing focuses on connecting individual assets with community assets to harness improved health and well-being. This convergence results in building social capital and individual resilience; this is also a mutually beneficial process for the participants, including individuals, communities, and institutions.<sup>15</sup> Both of these methods for promoting well-being are community-focused. What better way to institute new community health programs than to use existing community-focused art museums as change agents?

Art museums and the interactions that they facilitate can be conduits for individual improvements in health and wellness, including chronic illness. In essence, museums have the ability to act as change agents when they integrate health and wellness initiatives into mainstream museum programming. The positive changes that result from these efforts include building individual resilience and social capital among all audiences. While art museums cannot cure chronic illness, they can alleviate some of the symptoms, thereby improving the quality of life of the larger communities that they serve.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Helen Chatterjee and Guy Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being* (London: Routledge, 2017), 18.

<sup>2</sup> "About RxART," *RxArt*, accessed May 24, 2020, <https://rxart.net/about/about-rxart/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee and Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Chatterjee and Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being*, 109.

<sup>6</sup> "The MoMA Alzheimer's Project: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia," *MoMA*, accessed May 24, 2020, <http://www.moma.org/visit/accessibility/meetme/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Access Programs," *Nelson Atkins*, accessed May 24, 2020, <https://nelson-atkins.org/accessibility/access-programs/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Chatterjee and Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Lois H. Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (London: Routledge, 2010), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Institute of Health Equity, "Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010," *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review: Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010*, accessed May 24, 2020, [www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report](http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report).

<sup>12</sup> Ian J. Koebner, Scott M. Fishman, Debora Paterniti, Doris Sommer, Claudia M Witt, Deborah Ward, and Jill G Joseph, "The Art of Analgesia: A Pilot Study of Art Museum Tours to Decrease Pain and Social Disconnection Among Individuals with Chronic Pain," *Pain Medicine* 20, no. 4 (April 2019): 681–691.

<sup>13</sup> Chatterjee and Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Kaplan, "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1995): 169–182.

<sup>15</sup> Chatterjee and Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being*, 112-113.

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