

Spotlight

Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing is one of the greatest public policy challenges of our time

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australians' mental health and wellbeing has been substantial, with measures to prevent the spread of the virus causing ongoing uncertainty and disruption to our everyday lives. In 2020–21, more than 3.4 million Australians sought help from a health care professional for their mental health.¹⁴¹ In 2022, of Australians aged 16–85, an estimated 8.6 million had experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life (44% of the population) and 4.2 million had experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months.¹⁴²

The arts have been shown to improve quality of life in myriad ways, including increasing mental wellbeing, particularly for young people;¹⁴³ addressing loneliness and ageing;¹⁴⁴ decreasing anxiety and depression;¹⁴⁵ treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and helping communities recover from trauma.¹⁴⁶

The arts help to build stronger and more cohesive societies through mutual understanding and trust, and help us shape our shared values and national identity. The arts can help save on spending and increase returns on investments across health services and social care, helping meet major challenges such as ageing, loneliness, chronic conditions and mental health.

Australians recognise the positive benefits of arts on our mental health and wellbeing and more attend arts events for this reason

Many Australians are acutely aware of the benefits of arts and cultural participation on our everyday life. Results from the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey show seven in ten Australians agree that cultural and creative experiences **make for a richer and more meaningful life** (69%). Over half of Australians say creativity and the arts have a 'big' or 'very big' impact on our **sense of wellbeing and happiness** (56%) and **help us deal with stress, anxiety or depression** (56%).

Art is pretty important for my wellbeing, because I describe myself as quite an artistic person ... Some people, they relieve their stress with exercising and stuff. But for me ... I relieve my stress through drawing or crafting and stuff.

– Focus group participant

Footnote numbers correspond to those in the full **Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey 2022 Report**.

¹⁴¹ ABS 2022, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing*.

¹⁴² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Prevalence and Impact of Mental Illness*.

¹⁴³ Davies et al 2015, 'The Art of Being Mentally Healthy: A study to quantify the relationship between recreational arts engagement and mental well-being in the general population,' *BMC Public Health* 16:15. Patternmakers 2017, *ATYP Impact Evaluation*.

¹⁴⁴ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts 2017, *Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Creative Health: The arts for health and wellbeing*.

¹⁴⁵ First reported in: Slawson N 2017, 'It's Time to Recognise the Contribution Arts Can Make to Health and Wellbeing,' *The Guardian*, 11 October.

¹⁴⁶ Baker et al 2017, 'A Systematic Review of the Efficacy of Creative Arts Therapies in the Treatment of Adults with PTSD', *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 10:6.



Soft Centre, 2023.
Credit: Ravyna Jassani.

While there has been little change in the proportion of Australians who say the arts have a ‘big’ or ‘very big’ impact on our **wellbeing** (56% for both 2022 and 2019), there has been a substantial increase in those who are **attending arts and cultural events to improve their wellbeing**. This suggests people may be more likely to now act on their awareness of their own wellbeing. A third of all Australians reported this motivation in 2022 (32% up from 25% in 2019). Over a third of **young Australians** aged 15–24 attend creative events *to improve their wellbeing* (35% up from 24% 2019).

[Art] helps you relax and take your mind off the news. Cause the news was bombarded with everything negative during the last two years, [it is good] to draw your attention to something creative that makes you a bit more happier.

– Focus group participant

Arts and cultural events help us feel connected to others, improving our wellbeing

We know that isolation can occur at any age through a loss of social connections – be it family, friends, workplaces – and in particular as we age. The arts can provide moments for Australians to come together to gain human connection.

Nearly three in five Australians agree that *cultural and creative experiences allow me to connect with others* (56% compared to 54% in 2019). Just under half of Australians attend arts events *to socialise and connect with others* (46% up from 41% in 2019).

Arts and culture are the foundations for First Nations health and wellbeing

Culture is central to understanding First Nations health and wellbeing and shapes First Nations people's relationship between self and Country, kin, community and spirituality.¹⁴⁷ Arts and cultural participation among First Nations people can support the development of strong and resilient First Nations children and communities. It is shown to improve First Nations people's physical and mental health and wellbeing; support greater social inclusion and cohesion; support safer communities with reduction in crime and improved rehabilitation; as well as help prevent suicide for First Nations people. Arts and cultural participation can improve school attendance and lead to higher levels of educational attainment; and help garner more employment, economic opportunities and meaningful work.¹⁴⁸

More than two thirds of First Nations respondents agree that *creative activities and experiences helped with my mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic* (68%, 20 percentage points higher than Australians overall). Wellbeing is a strong motivator for arts participation for **specifically-engaged First Nations respondents living in regional and remote communities**.¹⁴⁹ Three in five specifically-engaged regional and remote First Nations respondents are very likely to attend the arts *to improve their wellbeing* (61%, compared to 32% of non-specifically engaged regional and remote First Nations respondents). Specifically-engaged regional and remote First Nations respondents are more likely to attend arts events *to improve their wellbeing* in 2022 than in 2019 when only 38% cited this reason.

Arts and creative activities supported positive wellbeing during COVID-19 lockdowns

Since the last National Arts Participation Survey was conducted in 2019, Australians have experienced unprecedented disruption from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As with the rest of the world, our movements were restricted to limit the spread of the virus. We stayed at home as much as we could and had limited access to our friends, family and our normal routines.

Nearly half of Australians, or 9.9 million Australians aged 15 and over, believe *creative activities and experiences helped with their mental health or wellbeing during the pandemic* (48%). Those who were most likely to agree that the arts positively contributed to their mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19 were **young Australians aged 15–24** (61% compared to 48% of Australians overall) and **First Nations respondents** (68% compared to 48% of Australians overall).

¹⁴⁷ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy*, final report.

¹⁴⁸ Office for the Arts 2012, *Culture and Closing the Gap*, Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport.

¹⁴⁹ Based on a sample size of 180 First Nations respondents living in regional, rural and remote communities. This sample is included in the total of 9,396 people surveyed in 2022.

Just under half of Australians believe *creative activities and experiences gave them something meaningful to do during the pandemic* (46%). A third of Australians, or 7.2 million Australians aged 15 and over, found arts and creative activities helped them *stay connected to family and friends* (35%).

Findings from the focus groups show **Australians strongly recognise the importance of arts and creative activities to our health and wellbeing during COVID-19**, particularly during lockdowns and restrictions.

Without the hustle and bustle of regular daily life, many people had extra time to learn new artistic skills, connect with family and friends through creative activities, or view artistic content shared from global sources.

Focus group participants highlighted the positive impacts of arts and creative activities on their mental health and wellbeing. Some described the ways they used arts and creative activities to **fill extra time**, to provide a distraction from the concerns of the global pandemic and to give them **something meaningful to do**.

While learning new creative skills, such as knitting, painting or cooking, helped Australians **rediscover the joy of an artistic activity**, it also provided **a sense of accomplishment**.

I write poetry, so it was a perfect, quiet time, not just that there was more time, but that there seemed to be less activity in my life. So I was quite content sitting quietly and, racking my brains into verse.

– Focus group participant

Creative activities also provided an opportunity for us to **share experiences both in person and digitally**, enabling **human connection** during a time of uncertainty. Focus group participants highlighted examples of creative experiences that made them feel connected during lockdowns, including the Swan Lake Bath Ballet performed by 27 dancers from renowned dance companies across the globe in their own bathtubs, and videos of neighbours singing together across balconies.



Dance Break 2023 performance, Dancenorth Australia, Charters Towers (Gudjal), Queensland. Credit: Amber Haines.