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# Museum Visits on a Doctor's Prescription

## A Path to Positive Health?

*By Marjelle Vermeulen, Ellen Loots and Pauwke Berkers*

“Go see the museum”, said the doctor. Does the phenomenon of ‘doctors prescribing museum visits’ signal the breakthrough of art’s positive impact on health beyond its biomedical aspects (Smid & Wydoodt, 2016)? Or is it just a fad? Is it a pretended quick fix to mitigate the feelings of isolation and alienation experienced during a pandemic? Or is a referral system becoming part of culture-based welfare services? What are the implications and opportunities for arts management?

Considering health as an individual’s ability to adapt and take control in life (Huber et al., 2011), the concept of Positive Health has been adopted by policymakers and practitioners to help people find ways to cope with the challenges in their lives (Stekelenburg et al., 2016). Positive Health entails physical and mental health and centralizes around the notions of autonomy and meaningfulness.

Art has been considered to be the means par excellence to achieve this goal. Over the world, interventions are organized with the purpose of contributing to health-related ends (Sonke & Lee, 2015; Thomson et al., 2018). Even if sporadic still, doctors prescribing museum visits as a means to add culture to the care regimen are becoming more common. Experiments have been taking place, by example in the Dutch museum field, to make people with medical issues experience health benefits.

In our ongoing research at Erasmus University Rotterdam, we disentangle the cause-effect relationships between arts participation and health, specifically Positive Health. A Theory of Change allows us to identify the expected impact of specific arts-related interventions on specific health-related outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This text benefits from interviews with representatives of the museums in the Netherlands that are referred to.

## Positive Health and art

The concept of Positive Health came into being as an approach to health alternative to what the World Health Organization in 1948 defined as health: a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Such a definition would qualify a large share of the current world population as 'unhealthy' owing to considerable numbers of people aging with chronic illnesses. Machteld Huber therefore pled for a reformulation of health that emphasizes the resilience and the capacity of individuals to maintain and self-manage several aspects of their health, rather than have them chase rainbows (Huber et al., 2011). Positive Health's broad perspective of health entails six dimensions:

- 1) Bodily functions** include feeling healthy and fit, without physical complaints or pain (IPH, 2021). The evidence that passive and active arts participation have positive effects on someone's physical condition is growing (O'Neill, 2010). Specifically, attending cultural events such as art exhibitions, museums or theatres leads to self-perceived improved physical health and vitality.
- 2) Mental well-being** refers to being able to remember things and concentrate, and to being cheerful, accepting oneself and feeling in control (IPH, 2021). For example, women with breast cancer were found to experience the effects of art therapy on their coping mechanisms and feelings of being in control, which are important preconditions for mental well-being (Öster et al., 2006).
- 3) When individuals experience *meaningfulness***, they experience a life in which they are grateful, pursue ideals and feel confident (IPH, 2021). Research demonstrates that people with dementia experience feelings of self-confidence, owing to the sense of participation that is aroused by taking part in museum programs that overcome the limitations of their short-term memories (Mittelman & Epstein, 2009).
- 4) Research shows that happiness is strongly connected to someone's experience of *quality of life***. The Museum of Modern Art in New York collected evidence that people become happy because of the openness, laughter, emotions and conversations that are being aroused by museum visits (Mittelman & Epstein, 2009).
- 5) Social participation** (experiencing social contacts, the support of others and a sense of belonging) works in two directions: it is a health-related effect of attending cultural events, but also a means of nurturing other health dimensions. Attending cultural events

has the potential to improve visitors' perceived social functioning and to mitigate their feelings of loneliness.

6) Someone's *daily functioning* includes elements such as taking care of oneself, knowing one's limitations, adequately managing resources such as time and money, and being able to ask for help (IPH, 2021).

## Designing suited and mediated interventions for each group and each intended health outcome

Programs aimed to have a positive impact on physical and mental health and well-being must be tailored to specific needs and abilities of targeted groups and individuals. With its 'Unforgettable' program, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam organizes guided tours for people with dementia and their relatives during which memories, associations and stories are being evoked and shared. The Head of Education and Inclusion of the museum observes that the program could only be attended by people with reasonable good health conditions, and in the company of caregivers and trained staff members. In order to alleviate the barriers experienced by care homes when they take part in activities on location (they are labor intensive and require a budget and trained staff), the Stedelijk Museum is exploring alternative programs that could take place in the care home, and in that manner are more inclusive. The Head of Public Programmes & Learning of Mauritshuis in The Hague realizes that, although health programs aim to be inclusive, a cognitive distance to the exhibitions can have negative effects, for example when individuals of bicultural backgrounds cannot relate to the artworks. This is also reflected in research: art activities in palliative care settings can have a positive influence on individuals' well-being, but equally may impose challenges when well-being is negatively affected, when experiences are incomprehensible or impeded by logistic hassle related to accessibility (Rodeyans et al., 2021).

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With its 'museotherapy' program, the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts is a frontrunner in the domain. Innovative activities address various groups with special needs. Creative workshops intend to enhance the self-esteem and socialization of young adults living with speech and auditory process-

ing disorders, or develop feelings of belonging and positive body image of people with eating disorders. For this, the museum joins forces with the medical field. Crucial for these programs to become successful, is specialized mediation. These programs require a deeper form of public engagement than regular customer service does. The museum management must offer training to employees to adequately welcome vulnerable groups, for example with train-the-trainer programs (O'Neill, 2010). It requires learning-by-doing to understand the needs, develop effective activities and train museum and heritage professionals in these new roles.

### Institutional partnerships between art and health

Only profound partnerships between the art and health fields can eliminate the practical and mental barriers that impede impactful museum experiences. The Senior Education and Interpretation of Centraal Museum Utrecht explains that good relationships are needed to bring individuals with health problems physically to the museum. A referral system (for example, by doctor's prescriptions) can take up this role. It is a system "that links members of the health service or voluntary organizations with staff in cultural organizations, so that the former can refer their patients/ clients/ members to the latter" (O'Neill, 2010, p. 27). Becoming 'referral-ready' requires that museums need to put in place accessible and efficient methods that enable health institutions and voluntary organizations to refer people to museums. Clear booking procedures and a good network of contacts at both sides are key. Logistic solutions are helpful as well. For example, the Dutch healthcare organization AxionContinu arranges the transportation of patients for their 'Friday Museum Day'. To install partnerships between art and health, both sides should have confidence in the quality of the museum activity and the hospitality that can be foreseen. Museums can learn from each other.

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In the Netherlands, cultural prescriptions programs are a relatively new modality and only recently adopted by museums as the Rijksmuseum and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven. The Head of Public Programmes & Learning explains the motivation of Mauritshuis to

engage with cultural prescriptions: “If the mission of a museum is to make everyone to feel at home or be given the opportunity to be touched and inspired, also through online modalities, then the idea of ‘accessibility’ requires the museum to remove any mental or physical barrier.” Doctor’s prescriptions may serve as a means to overcome the mental and physical distance to the museum.

*“If the mission of a museum is to make everyone to feel at home or be given the opportunity to be touched and inspired (...) then the idea of ‘accessibility’ requires the museum to remove any mental or physical barrier.”*

At the European level, the Art & Well-being project with Romanian, Slovenian, Belgian and Italian partners explores the potential of art to enhance individual and community well-being. Within a pilot project, tickets for pre-selected cultural events are made available to be redeemed in exchange for prescriptions distributed by care providers as an additional care treatment. It will be the first time that a systematic approach to cultural prescriptions is applied and analysed on its effectiveness. Such insights are needed to understand the conditions for strong partnerships between art and health and to aptly include cultural prescriptions into national systems of culture-based welfare services.

### The way ahead: assessing the impact

Museum management practitioners are developing pilot projects to address the specific health needs of various groups and adapt their activities and hospitality services to the interests and abilities of end users, supported by educational and logistic efforts (Rodeyns et al., 2021). Convincing evidence of the impact of art on health is needed still to establish enduring partnerships between institutional art and health partners. Research that demonstrates how and why art contributes to public health and well-being (Daykin et al., 2017) faces challenges. First, studies that attest the positive impact of art on health are at times prone to reversed causality. Is arts participation contributing to health, or are healthier people taking part in cultural activities? Second, the generalizability of the effects and impact of arts-based interventions on health is limited, due to the singularities of such interventions, participants, and health dimensions.

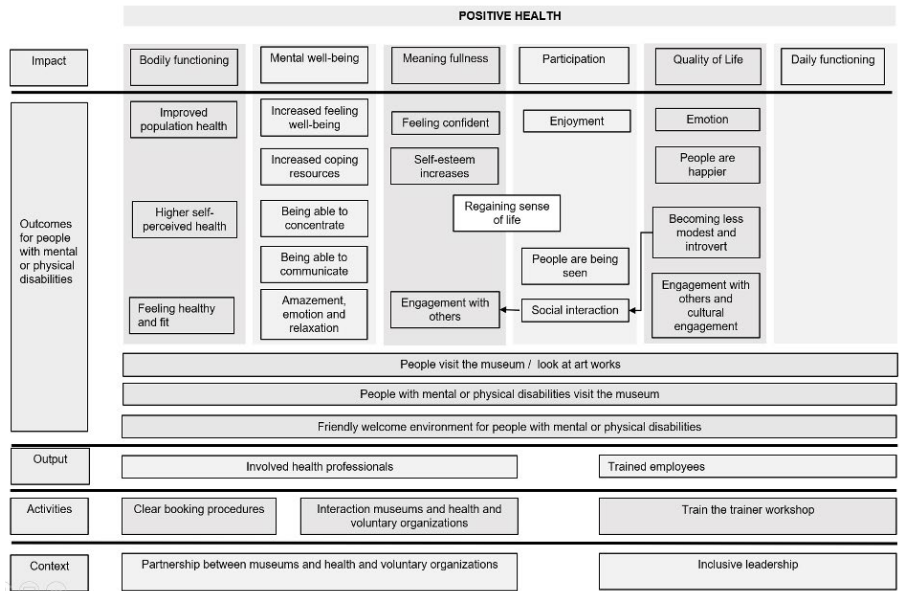


Figure 1: Theory of Change of expected causal relationships between museum activities and Positive Health

Our Theory of Change (figure 1) visualizes the expected causal relationships between museum activities and their intended health effects. Concretely, based on interviews and existing research, it frames the rationale for referral/cultural prescriptions to evidence of Positive Health outcomes. For example, we theorize that quality of life can be positively influenced when individuals are able to engage with culture and other people, which makes them happier, closer to their emotions and possibly less introverted. Measuring the impact of art on Positive Health can occur in various ways, including longitudinal studies in which patients are being followed over time (Johansson et al., 2001), randomized control trial methods (Bygren et al., 2009) and other ways of collecting self-reported data on individuals' physical and mental conditions (Wilkinson et al., 2007). Joining forces and developing mutual understanding of each other's goals are the first steps that museum management and the health sector must take for creating a real impact of art on Positive Health. By virtue of pilot projects and impact assessments that realistically indicate how and why art contributes to dimensions of Positive Health, both sides may realize that they are closer to each other than they think. It takes two to tango but also to bring culture-based welfare services one step closer.



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