The history of creative self-expression is as old as the history of human culture itself. Ancient flutes made of bone and ivory, or paintings of animals in caves made more than 40,000 years ago give us a glimpse of how expressing ourselves has always been a part of what it means to be a human being.

Simply put: expressing ourselves through art, music, dance or other creative expression makes us feel good. Its effects on our mental health and well-being have been widely documented, both in anecdotal experiences and in the scientific literature. Art therapy (a clinical intervention where a person engages in a specifically designed artistic activity under the guidance of a trained therapist) has been demonstrated to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma while improving mood, coping, quality of life, cognition, and self-esteem.[[1]](#footnote-2)

While using art to treat a mental health condition is best accomplished with the help of a professional therapist, anyone can benefit from incorporating creative self-expression into their wellness routine. And evidence shows that “artistic talent” or training in the arts simply isn’t necessary to obtain the benefits of engaging in an artistic outlet -- it’s not the outcome that matters, it’s the process. Even activities as simple as doodling have been shown to activate the reward pathways in our brain, elevating mood and making us feel better.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Creative self-expression can be a powerful tool for survival and healing not only for individuals, but for communities as well, especially those who have experienced trauma or oppression. In the deep South, Native American people and enslaved African Americans even used music and dance as one tool for survival and connection in order to endure the most horrific, inhumane experiences possible: genocide and enslavement. Combining “the four-beat, big-drum rhythm of Native American Pow-Wow music with the various African and Caribbean polyrhythms that the [enslaved people] had brought to the New World. This collaborative, creative expression is what gave us the Blues, Jazz, Rock, Reggae, Hip-Hop, as well as the visual art and dances that these musical genres inspire.”[[3]](#footnote-4) In doing so, they gifted the world with several genres of artistic expression that continue to provide sources of self-expression that support healing and the ongoing fight for social justice.

This May, as we celebrate Mental Health Matters Month, we are focusing on how expressing ourselves in different ways can raise awareness of mental health, break down barriers between people, build our own wellness, and strengthen our communities. To get involved, visit EachMindMatters.org/May2020.

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK279641/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Girija Kaimal, Hasan Ayaz, Joanna Herres, Rebekka Dieterich-Hartwell, Bindal Makwana, Donna H. Kaiser, Jennifer A. Nasser. **Functional near-infrared spectroscopy assessment of reward perception based on visual self-expression: Coloring, doodling, and free drawing**. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 2017; 55: 85 DOI: [10.1016/j.aip.2017.05.004](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.05.004) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://upliftconnect.com/can-art-heal-cultural-wounds/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)