

Museums and galleries health benefits

Adrienne Wyper / 21 May 2019



Seeing an exhibition has benefits that reach far further than the visual stimulation of looking at artworks.



The National Portrait Gallery London

A stroll around a museum or gallery, looking at artworks or exhibits, whether it's a quick pop-in or a long-anticipated viewing, is always pleasant, but our enjoyment has long-lasting health benefits, both mental and physical, that far outweigh any price of admission.

One side-effect of a visit that gallery-goers seem to recognise is that it aids relaxation, and eases stress. In a large survey by the Art Fund, the charity that helps museums and galleries buy and show works of art for everyone to enjoy, 63% of those taking part said their visit was specifically for stress reduction. And it's not too difficult to understand how this works: focusing on an attractive or intriguing object or scene takes our mind off everyday worries. But the effects do go deeper.

Why going to the theatre makes you feel better

Take time for you

Everyday life nowadays can feel hectic and although we know we should devote some time to relaxation, we don't always manage it. As Paul Dolan, professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics and Political Science, who wrote the intro to the report on the Art Fund survey, says: 'Taking the time to relieve everyday stress and anxiety is crucial for wellbeing. While most of us have the time, we simply don't take it. This is a symptom of the pace of the modern world that we live in, but any activity that helps us take a break is a good thing and something everyone should do more of.'

Visiting cultural centres should be an easy way to wind down, as the survey reveals that half of us want to do it more regularly, and over half of us live within walking distance of at least one museum.

And you can do it whenever you want or need to as most exhibitions or collections are open all day, almost every day; there's no set performance time – apart, of course, from super-popular shows for which you need to book.

Boost your brain

Thinking about the meaning behind a piece of art or an exhibit, or reading about the artist who created it, is stimulating for the mind. Looking at a work stimulates the visual cortex and engages the areas of the brain used in object recognition, as you might expect: so we know what we're looking at. Our pleasure and reward systems are also engaged. And new experiences enhance the neuroplasticity of the brain, which is its ability to adapt, by creating new neural pathways to take in new information and adapt to new experiences. Neuroplasticity declines with age, and boosting it may help prevent the onset of dementia. A study of over 1,000 people in Sweden found that cultural attendance had a protective effect against dementia.

Fun with friends

Attending an interesting show gives us a new topic of conversation to share with others.

And, of course, if we visit a museum or gallery with friends, or join in with an activity such as a tour, discussion or workshop, we reap the rewards of social interaction, which include the release of our feelgood hormones, lowering stress levels and helping to form memories. This effect is so well recorded that a research project at University College London is investigating the potential of museums on prescription for older adults.

Find out more about social prescribing

What are you waiting for?

Plan your next outing at [Museums.co.uk](#) with over 1,700 entries, and [Art UK](#) which has over 3,000 venues with public art collections.

Many are free, but you can keep costs down with the Art Fund's Art Pass, an annual card which gives half-price or even free entry to loads of cultural hotspots, from £67. And if you're over 60, you can save on entrance fees, too – but schedule a visit soon because some organisations are doing away with these concessions.

How to save money on a day out

Play fun, free online games, including crosswords, sudokus and codewords, at our new website [Exceptional](#).

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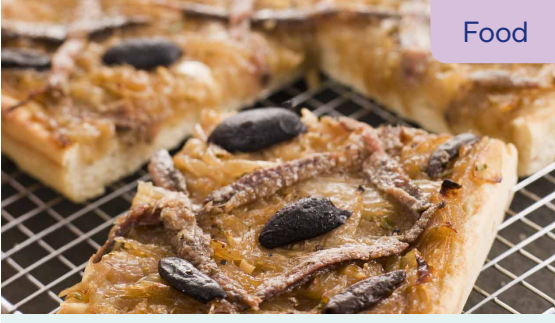


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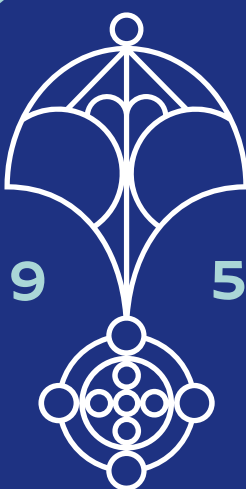


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