Is Arts Engagement a Prescription for a Longer Life?

A large, long-term study found an association between attending museums, galleries and the theater and longevity.

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Regularly getting out to museums, galleries and the opera or theater isn't just food for the soul—it also may be a tonic for a longer life. That's according to a new long-term study conducted in England that found an association between routine arts engagement and a lower risk of death among older adults.

The findings show a longevity benefit no matter what the eventual cause of death, including major ones such as heart disease, lung conditions or cancer.

Previous research has found that tuning into the arts can boost physical and mental well-being, addressing such problems as depression, dementia, chronic pain and frailty. Now researchers at University College London, led by Daisy Fancourt, PhD, an associate professor of psychobiology and epidemiology, have published their new study in The BMJ. For the study they sought to assess the association between varying frequency of arts engagement and the risk of death by analyzing data on more than 6,000 adults in England who were at least 50 years old and were participants in the English Longitudinal Study of Aging.

At the study's outset in 2004 to 2005, the participants were asked how frequently they engaged with the arts, including attending the opera, the theater, concerts, museums, art galleries and exhibitions.

During an average 12 years of follow-up, 17% (355 of 1,906) of those who engaged with the arts at least every few months died, as did 27% (809 of 3,042) of those who engaged with art activities once or twice per year and 48% (837 of 1,762) of those who never engaged. This translated to death rates per 1,000 cumulative years of follow-up of a respective 2.4, 3.5 and 6 deaths among the three groups.

Compared with those who never engaged with the arts, those who did so once or twice per year had a 14% lower risk of dying over that time period. Those who engaged every few months or more had a 31% lower mortality risk. The researchers adjusted the data to account for various differences among the participants, including demographic, socioeconomic, health (including

cardiovascular and respiratory disease and cancer), behavioral and social factors.

The capacity of engagement with the arts to promote longevity seemed to be explained by variations in the study participants' cognition, mental health and physical activity levels. That said, the study authors found that the association between experiencing art held up even after they controlled for these factors, as well as mobility problems, poverty, wealth and retirement.

Note that because this study merely observed people over time, as opposed to testing an arts-based intervention, it cannot prove a cause and effect between seeing a show and keeping the curtain up on one's own life.

Check out another Cancer Health article, "Art Therapy Benefits Cancer Caregivers."

To read the study, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

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