

# Cultivating Creativity: The Role of Art and Visual Thinking Strategies to Support Community and Resilience for Healthcare Professionals

*Lisa Abia-Smith<sup>1</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup> Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon, College of Design,  
Eugene, Oregon  
abia@uoregon.edu*

## BACKGROUND

The Creative Wellness Workshop Series, co-developed by Oregon Health Science University (OHSU) and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) at the University of Oregon (UO), addresses the growing need for staff support in healthcare. Health professionals frequently face significant challenges, including burnout, emotional stress, and feelings of isolation in high-pressure environments. Recognizing the arts' potential to foster resilience, connection, and emotional decompression, this series integrates art-based approaches to provide relief and enhance peer support for medical staff, faculty, and clinicians at OHSU. Key components of the initiative include Art Walks and Creative Decompress workshops that employ Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), creating structured opportunities for slow looking, self-reflection, and shared experiences. This study examines the effectiveness of VTS in reducing

burnout, promoting community, and enhancing well-being among healthcare professionals. This collaboration is part of the broader "Art Heals" initiative at the JSMA, which leverages art as a tool for resilience and education in healthcare settings.

In response to increasing demands and stressors in healthcare, these workshops aim to equip professionals with skills that support emotional resilience, a sense of belonging, and methods for decompression. The program aligns with OHSU's strategic wellness goals and complements the "Creative Wellness" initiative led by the OHSU Wellness Leadership Team. Additionally, it aligns with UO's mission to foster resources that enhance well-being and connection.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The workshops consist of two primary components: Art Walks and art-making sessions. During Art Walks, participants engage in slow looking with selected artworks from OHSU's collection, using VTS to describe, analyze, and interpret visual elements. This reflective approach enhances participants' visual analysis skills. Writing prompts and small group discussions further encourage collaborative reflection, fostering a supportive learning environment. From December 2023 to October 2024, the Creative Wellness Series included nine workshops featuring Art Walks and Creative Decompress sessions that incorporated mindful stitching, movement, and mixed-media activities. These workshops were designed to be adaptable for diverse healthcare roles at OHSU, creating a non-judgmental environment for participants to explore their perspectives. Data were collected through pre- and post-workshop surveys measuring stress reduction, sense of connection, and participant satisfaction.

#### RESULTS

From December 2023 to October 2024, the program engaged 160 OHSU employees, yielding notable outcomes: 97% reported high satisfaction, 91% indicated decreased stress levels, and 91% felt more connected to colleagues.

Qualitative feedback highlighted the transformative nature of close observation and shared experiences with art.

## DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that VTS-facilitated art engagement effectively enhances well-being among healthcare professionals. By slowing cognitive processes and fostering open dialogue, the workshops provided a restorative break from clinical pressures, supporting individual resilience and community building. Compared to traditional wellness programs, art-based approaches appear particularly effective in creating the psychological safety essential for emotional decompression (Mangione et al., 2018). Limitations include a small sample size and limited timeframe, potentially affecting generalizability. Future research should examine longitudinal effects and explore the integration of similar programs into healthcare settings.

## CONCLUSION

The Creative Wellness Series demonstrates the potential of the arts in healthcare environments, offering a framework to address burnout and build community through structured, arts-based engagement. Future studies may investigate the incorporation of VTS and art-making workshops as standard wellness practices in healthcare institutions to enhance professionals' resilience

## REFERENCES

- Abia-Smith L. Preparing the mind and learning to see: Art museums as training grounds for medical students and residents. In: Lambert PD, editor. *Managing arts programs in healthcare*. New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group; 2016. p. 255–70.
- Mangione, S., Chakraborti, C., Staltari, G., Harrison, R., Tunkel, A. R., Liou, K. T., et al. (2018). Medical students' exposure to the humanities correlates with positive personal qualities and reduced burnout: A multi-institutional U.S. survey. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 33(5), 628–634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-018-4254-0>

- Creech, A., & Hallam, S. (2013). A concept mapping approach to exploring the relationship between music and well-being. *Arts & Health*, 5(1), 58-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.724241>
- Hagger, M. S., & Chatzisarantis, N. L. (2007). Self-determination theory and the psychology of exercise. *In Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8(3), 297-313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.06.001>
- Hetland, L., & Winner, E. (2001). The arts and academic achievement: What the evidence shows. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333655>
- Karp, I., & Lemaire, A. (2019). Art and health: A critical overview of the evidence. *Journal of Art for Life*, 1(1), 20-30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10350-018-0538-4>
- Mangione, S., Chakraborti, C., Staltari, G., Harrison, R., Tunkel, A. R., Liou, K. T., et al. (2018). Medical students' exposure to the humanities correlates with positive personal qualities and reduced burnout: A multi-institutional U.S. survey. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 33(5), 628–634. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-018-4254-0>
- McNiff, S. (2013). *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination*. Shambhala Publications.
- Shapiro, S. L., Schwartz, G. E., & Astin, J. A. (2006). Stress management in medical education: A review of the literature. *Academic Medicine*, 81(3), 202-210. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.ACM.0000192008.20240.5c>