

Abstract

Creating visual art has increasingly been considered as a possible way to support emotional well-being, but the processes through which art-making may affect adolescents are not yet fully understood. This literature review examines existing research on the relationship between creating visual art, stress management, and emotional well-being in adolescents. The review considers research on attention, distraction, emotional expression, emotional regulation, creativity, brain activity, art therapy, and adolescents’ experiences with art-making. It also examines how the context of art-making, individual differences, developmental stage, and the type of artistic activity may influence its effects. Across the literature, one mechanism through which creating visual art may support emotional well-being may be through redirecting attention, providing opportunities for emotional expression and self-reflection, and engaging individuals in a creative process. However, the existing evidence has important limitations. Many studies focus on young children or adults rather than adolescents, examine short-term emotional changes rather than long-term outcomes, or use small, culturally-limited, or mixed gender samples that may impact generalization of findings. Furthermore, studies often define independent art making and formal art therapy in completely different ways, making it difficult to accurately compare their effects in the long term. Overall, the research suggests that creating visual art may support adolescents’ stress management and emotional well-being, but its effects are unlikely to be universal or explained by one mechanism alone. More adolescent-specific and long-term research is needed to determine how, why, and under what circumstances visual art-making may be most beneficial.

In What Ways Can Creating Visual Arts Support Adolescents’ Stress Management and Emotional Well-Being?

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period of major emotional, social, and cognitive development. Academic responsibilities, relationships, identity, family situations, and other life experiences can contribute to stress and affect emotional well-being.

Creating visual art (including **drawing, painting, colouring, collage-making, and digital art**) may provide adolescents with opportunities to focus their attention, express emotions, reflect on personal experiences, and become engaged in a creative process.

However, research has not yet established **one universal explanation** for how art-making may support well-being.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In what ways can creating visual art support adolescents’ stress management and emotional well-being?

Methods

This project used a **literature review methodology** to examine the relationship between **creating visual art, stress management, and emotional well-being in adolescents**.

SOURCES

The review included **research and qualitative studies, creativity and neuroscience research, educational and professional materials, and a professional interview with an art therapist intern**. Research involving adolescents was prioritized, while studies involving children or broader populations were included when they provided insight into possible mechanisms of art-making.

ANALYSIS

Sources were compared based on **participants, research methods, settings, types of art-making, and emotional or psychological outcomes**. The literature was then organized into themes including **attention and distraction, emotional expression and self-reflection, emotional regulation, creative engagement, context, individual differences, and short- versus long-term effects**.

APPROACH

Because this was a **literature review rather than an original experiment**, the project synthesized patterns across existing research to identify **how, why, and under what circumstances** creating visual art may support adolescent emotional well-being.

Results

Visual art may support adolescent stress management and emotional well-being through several interconnected processes:

- **Attention & Distraction:** Creative activity can redirect attention away from stressors and encourage focused engagement.
- **Emotional Expression:** Art provides a nonverbal way to communicate feelings that may be difficult to express through words.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Creating art may help individuals process, organize, and manage difficult emotions.
- **Creative Engagement:** The process of making art can encourage reflection, exploration, and a sense of involvement.
- **Brain & Cognitive Processes:** Research suggests creative activity can involve attention, emotion-related processing, and cognitive engagement.

Overall finding: The research suggests that creating visual art **may support stress management and emotional well-being**, but its effects are not universal and may depend on the individual, context, and type of artistic activity.



Benefits of Creating



Discussion

The findings suggest that creating visual art may support adolescents’ stress management and emotional well-being through **multiple, interconnected processes** rather than one single mechanism.

- Art can provide a **focused activity** that redirects attention from stressors.
- Creating art may allow for **emotional expression and self-reflection**.
- The benefits may differ depending on **individual needs, artistic activity, and context**.
- Creating art independently is different from **formal art therapy**, which involves a trained art therapist.
- Much of the existing research includes **broader populations**, highlighting the need for more adolescent-specific evidence.

Key takeaway: Visual art shows potential as an accessible way to support emotional well-being, but more research is needed to understand **when, how, and for whom** it is most effective.

Conclusion

Creating visual art may support adolescents’ stress management and emotional well-being through **focused attention, emotional expression, self-reflection, and emotional regulation**. The research suggests that art can provide adolescents with a way to engage with their emotions while temporarily redirecting attention away from stressors. However, these benefits are **not universal** and may depend on the individual, the type of artistic activity, and the context in which it takes place. It is also important to distinguish **independent art-making from formal art therapy**, which involves a trained professional. Overall, visual art shows promising potential as an **accessible and meaningful way to support adolescent well-being**, but more research focused specifically on adolescents and long-term outcomes is needed.

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