**Looking at Art is Good for Your Health**

***By Daniel Baker***

Multiple scientific studies have shown that experiencing art imparts greater mental health and overall wellbeing. According to a World Health Organization Report: Results from over 3000 studies identified a major role for the arts in the prevention of ill health, promotion of health, and management and treatment of illness across the lifespan. How does it do this? In short, by increasing dopamine and serotonin levels, while reducing cortisol levels in the body.

There is increasing evidence in rehabilitation medicine and the field of neuroscience that art enhances brain function by impacting brain wave patterns, emotions, and the nervous system. These benefits don't just come from making art, they also occur by experiencing art. According to Neurology Professor Semir Zeki, of the University College London, MRI scans show a specific part of the brain, the medial orbitofrontal cortex, lighting up when one sees or hears something perceived as being beautiful. The medial orbitofrontal cortex is positioned within the head directly behind the eye sockets.

 Zeki published an informative paper in 2011 that confirmed that the effect on the brain of the perception of beauty in art causes the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter. When you have an increase of dopamine, your mood improves, and social interaction is more enjoyable.

In addition to providing pleasure, art can also help us cope with stress. Over time, stress has major negative health effects. When we experience stress, the body produces cortisol, a steroid hormone that serves as a physical and mental stimulant. Too much stress, leading to too much cortisol can have long-term negative effects on the immune system and one’s physical health and mental wellbeing, even resulting in clinical depression and early death.

In a 2006 study, participants toured a London art museum for 35 minutes. Even such a brief exposure to art resulted in marked decreases of measured cortisol levels among the subjects of the test—demonstrating the calming effect of viewing art.

It’s no secret to art lovers and collectors that viewing a work of art can be a pleasurable experience, and now we have scientific evidence that it can be good for us too.

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*The information about the studies referred to in this article came from the Feb. 3, 2012 issue of EarthSky, “Semir Zeki: Beauty is in the brain of the beholder”, by Beth Lebwohl,* a*nd World Health Organiztion: Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67.—DB*

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