- Naturopathy

Art, music, nature: How they boost mental health

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Mental health support and resources extend far beyond the traditional realms of mental health professionals and medication.

Many aspects of daily life can play a significant role in improving mental health and well-being, including creative activities such as art, music and dance movement.

At the National University of Singapore and National University Health System's Yeo Boon Khim Mind Science Centre, its director,

Associate Professor John Wong, said that non-drug approaches can help people cope with stress and despair as well as aid them in their mental health recovery.

For instance, the care and companionship of an animal can be very therapeutic. Research done at the University of Hong Kong has shown this is particularly so for "hidden youth", as it helps these young people, who isolate themselves within their homes or rooms for months, to regain their self-belief.

"They (socially withdrawn youth) have low self-esteem and feel very rejected. When they are paired up with rescued animals that were rejected by their previous owners, the youth can connect with the dogs and cats," said Prof Wong.

This motivates them to care for the animals, and, from there, they may move on to get a job as an animal groomer, for instance, he said.

Here is a quick look at some of the non-drug mental health approaches that can be found here.

ART THERAPY

This uses artistic means such as drawing, painting or sculpting to treat mental illnesses and improve health.

It is used in hospitals for various purposes. For instance, at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the National University Hospital, it is used to engage children who do not respond to talk therapy, said Prof Wong.

At the Singapore General Hospital (SGH), art therapy was introduced in 2018, first to help patients with eating disorders. It is now also used to help patients in psychiatric outpatient care and the medical wards.

When patients are admitted into acute healthcare settings such as

SGH, they may also experience emotional stresses that profoundly affect their overall health.

Non-pharmacological creative therapy, such as art therapy and music therapy, can support patient recovery encompassing both physical and emotional well-being.

Ms Phylaine Toh Shu Ting, the only art therapist at SGH, said she has seen an increase in referrals from different departments, in line with growing awareness of the therapy as well as mental health.

"Many of our patients are navigating life-threatening illnesses or adjusting to significant medical diagnoses, and verbalising their experiences can be challenging, especially when cognitive and emotional processing are impacted by stress or trauma," said the senior art therapist.

"Art provides an alternative means of communication, unlocking insights that contribute to both psychological healing and interdisciplinary care."

Patients are generally seen for at least three months, with clear therapeutic goals and progress evaluations. Some require longerterm engagement, depending on the complexity of their condition, their progress and their stage of life, said Ms Toh.

When these patients stabilise and transition out of hospital, they may be referred to an appropriate community-based art therapist to continue with the therapy.

Art therapists can also be found in most public hospitals, hospices, rehabilitation centres, schools and community settings across Singapore.

MUSIC THERAPY

This can include singing, playing instruments, or listening to music and talking about its meaning, for instance. It is not the same as listening to music at home for relaxation as this is a programme that is planned and led by a therapist.

Music therapy, through both active and receptive engagement with music and with the skilled guidance of qualified professional music therapists, offers powerful tools to alleviate pain, reduce anxiety and improve mood, among other benefits, said Ms Estelle Ng Li En, a music therapist at SGH, one of three such therapists there.

When this is used in hospitals, medical music therapists, who specialise in this setting, will focus on addressing the acute emotional and psychological impact of medical events or hospitalisation.

For example, a medical music therapist may work alongside nurses to manage a patient's anxiety during a procedure, or collaborate with medical social workers to support patients who are actively deteriorating and their families, said Ms Ng.

In comparison, communitybased programmes may focus on long-term wellness and address a broader range of needs, she said.

Ms Ng said they have seen a significant increase in the demand for and recognition of music therapy as an evidence-based nonpharmacological method.

HORTICULTURAL THERAPY

This is a structured nature-based programme led by certified therapists. It is different from therapeutic horticulture, which helps to improve overall well-being through community gardening and socialising with others engaging in the same activity, said Prof Wong.

Therapists can be allied health professionals, or someone who is trained in horticultural therapy, he said.

The therapy has been shown to help with memory issues for people with dementia, those in the pre-dementia stage known as mild cognitive impairment, or even for people with subjective memory impairment, otherwise known as “senior moments”, he said.

Research is now being done in other areas. Prof Wong said the centre did a study in 2023 to 2024 to show that nature-based therapeutic programmes carried out in specially designed nature playgardens in Singapore can help to improve the emotional well-being, psychosocial behaviour and attention span of children aged five to nine who are diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Such programmes can be set up to help train parents, so that they can become therapists, helping their child with ASD learn to be comfortable and to socialise with other children in a natural calming environment, for instance, he said.

THE ART OF HEALING

Art provides an alternative means of communication, unlocking insights that contribute to both psychological healing and interdisciplinary care.

MS PHYLAINE TOH SHU TING, senior art therapist at SGH.