

A message of during a pandemic

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Traumatic experiences like war, dealing with cancer, other major health challenges, or death affect people in different ways. Change is always challenging. “People tend to feel anxious and unsafe when the environment changes” (Usher, Durkin & Bhullar, 2020, p. 315). This year, we can add a global pandemic that has drastically changed our lives where everyone in the world has been affected. “Not only is the COVID-19 pandemic a threat to physical health; it also affects mental health. During a crisis, it is natural for individuals to feel fear, sadness, and anxiety. Indeed, fear from the virus is spreading even faster than the virus itself” (Adhanom, 2020, p. 129). While millions of people have been following stay-at-home orders to remain physically healthy, there has been much less support for the psychological well-being of people. Mass quarantine causes people to feel socially isolated, which causes stress, anxiety, and fear (Rubin & Wessely, 2020). “The toll on individuals is not just physical and financial, but emotional as well” (Restubog, Ocampo & Wang, 2020, p. 1).

Although creative expression will not bring back a lost job, or prevent the fear of getting ill, creative expression like art, music, or dance can assist in mental health. When patients suffering from serious health issues have engaged in art as a therapeutic method, creative expression has reduced stress and anxiety (Reynolds & Lim, 2007; Kaimal, Ray, & Muniz, 2016). Most children engage in art in school or home, but at a certain age, unfortunately, most people leave art behind as something just for those who are good at it. How “good at it” is defined is negotiable. The research shows that “There are many reasons that art is a great stress relief tool, even for those who don't consider themselves artistically inclined” (Scott, 2019). Art is a way to process loss, grief, and trauma (Jones et al, 2018).

Here is one way I engaged with art during the pandemic. On my walks around the park, I often pick up little pieces of wood or bark. I take them home and paint them. My dining room table becomes my studio space with paints, brushes, bits and pieces of bark and wood, a cup of tea, candlelight, and music. Once my creations are dry, I return them to the woods. Here are some samples:







Like in Kaimal, Ray & Muniz's (2016) research, I would like to have tested my saliva for cortisol levels, before and after my engagement with art. Cortisol is the "body's main stress hormone" and often known as the "fight or flight" instinct (Chang). Stress elevates cortisol and creative expression can decrease an excessive amount. My hope is that seeing my paintings along a path in the park will also have had the same effect of lowering undue stress and anxiety related to the pandemic, but that would be another study – to explore whether looking at or experiencing art also has a cortisol lowering effect.

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About the Author

Dr. Helen Lepp Friesen teaches in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications at The University of Winnipeg. Her research interests include multimodal approaches to teaching writing in culturally diverse classes. During her Research Study leave, she studied teaching writing in prison. As part of her study, she taught Reading and Composition at San Quentin State Prison in California.