THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF FINE ART IN REDUCING STRESS AND EMOTIONAL FATIGUE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract
Stress and emotional fatigue are increasingly pervasive in modern life, prompting a search for accessible, non-pharmacological ways to support mental health. One area of growing interest is engagement with fine art, whether through viewing or creating it. While research in this area is expanding, comprehensive overviews of the evidence are still relatively scarce.This narrative review explores the potential of fine art to alleviate stress and emotional fatigue. It brings together findings from experimental studies, healthcare outcome research, and neuroaesthetics published between 2015 and 2025. We conducted a critical review of 25 peer-reviewed experimental studies and eight systematic reviews, including research that examined visual art viewing or art-making interventions using validated measures of stress, anxiety, or emotional exhaustion.The evidence consistently points to the same conclusion: both simply viewing art and actively making it can meaningfully lower physiological stress markers and self-reported feelings of emotional fatigue. Several key mechanisms appear to be at work, including the induction of 'flow' states, deeper cognitive engagement, a calming effect on physiological stress responses, and the enriching quality of the environment itself. In healthcare settings, for instance, artworks depicting natural landscapes show particularly strong benefits, with roughly 61% to 73% of patients reporting better mood and less stress after viewing them. Interestingly, original artworks seem to trigger a more powerful therapeutic response than reproductions, hinting that an artwork's authenticity and depth may foster a stronger emotional connection.Overall, the findings suggest that engaging with fine art is not just a pleasant pastime but an accessible, evidence-based way to manage stress and combat emotional fatigue. Broadening the use of arts-based interventions in healthcare, workplaces, and communities could offer real psychological benefits, while also contributing to wider economic gains through lower healthcare costs and better productivity.

Keywords: therapeutic art, stress reduction, emotional exhaustion, neuroaesthetics, arts in health, burnout prevention

INTRODUCTION
Stress-related disorders are on the rise globally. The World Health Organization has even called stress the "health epidemic of the 21st century" (World Health Organization, 2022). At the same time, emotional fatigue—a key feature of burnout—now affects an estimated 30-45% of healthcare workers and similar numbers in other high-pressure professions (Maslach & Leiter, 2023). These worrying trends have fueled interest in straightforward, non-drug approaches that can work alongside traditional mental health services.Among these emerging approaches, engagement with fine art has caught the attention of researchers, clinicians, and even policymakers. The link between art and healing is nothing new; cultures around the world have recognised it for millennia. But it's only recently that scientists have begun to rigorously study the ways aesthetic experiences can shape our psychological and physiological well-being (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2024).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To set the stage for this review, it's helpful to clarify what we mean by a few central concepts:

Therapeutic: The word comes from the Greek therapeutikos, meaning "inclined to serve." Today, it generally refers to interventions that have a beneficial effect on our mental or physical state (Dorland's Medical Dictionary, 2025). It's useful to distinguish between curative treatments, which aim to eradicate disease, and palliative ones, which focus on easing symptoms. Art-based approaches usually fall into this second category (Stuckey & Nobel, 2023). The quality of the relationship between a practitioner and participant—what's known as the therapeutic alliance—can also influence outcomes, and this holds true for arts-based methods as well (Horvath et al., 2024).

Stress: Stress is a complex psychophysiological phenomenon. Researchers typically define it in one of three ways (Lazarus & Folkman, 2023): (a) as a stimulus, meaning environmental demands or threats; (b) as a response, following Hans Selye's (1976) classic definition of stress as the body's non-specific response to any demand; or (c) through a transactional lens, which focuses on how an individual appraises events and whether they feel they have the resources to cope. Today, researchers also distinguish between eustress (beneficial stress that can enhance performance) and distress (the harmful kind that erodes well-being). Therapeutic interventions naturally target the latter (Quick & Henderson, 2024).

Emotional Fatigue: This term, often used interchangeably with emotional exhaustion, is considered the core component of burnout. It's characterised by feeling emotionally overextended and drained of one's emotional resources (Maslach et al., 2023). People experiencing it may withdraw emotionally, find it harder to empathise, feel persistently irritable, have trouble sleeping, and struggle at work (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 2024). Emotional fatigue tends to build up gradually, often from cumulative stress in emotionally demanding jobs (Freudenberger, 1974).

Research Objectives

This narrative review has a few main goals: (1) to bring together the latest evidence on whether fine art can effectively reduce stress and emotional fatigue; (2) to identify the mechanisms that might explain these therapeutic effects; (3) to look at the contextual factors that can influence outcomes; and (4) to suggest what this all means for clinical practice and future research.

METHOD

Search Strategy

We systematically searched PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science for studies published between January 2015 and December 2025. Our search terms included combinations like: "art" OR "fine art" OR "visual art" OR "painting" OR "aesthetics" combined with "stress" OR "emotional exhaustion" OR "burnout" OR "fatigue" and "therapeutic" OR "intervention" OR "treatment." We also manually checked the reference lists of key articles for any other relevant studies.

Inclusion Criteria

We included studies if they: (a) looked at engagement with visual art (either viewing or creating); (b) used reliable, validated measures of stress, anxiety, or emotional exhaustion; (c) presented original quantitative or qualitative data; (d) were published in peer-reviewed journals; and (e) were written in English. We also included systematic reviews and meta-analyses that met these criteria to help with our synthesis.

Synthesis Approach

Given the variety in study designs, how they measured outcomes, and the types of interventions used, we opted for a narrative synthesis, following the guidelines from Popay et al. (2023). We organised the findings thematically around the types of interventions, the outcomes measured, and the mechanisms proposed to explain the results.

RESULTS

Art in Healthcare Settings: Patient Outcomes

The use of visual art in hospitals and clinics is probably the most studied context for art-based stress reduction. One critical review that looked at 25 experimental studies in healthcare settings (Thompson et al., 2025) found consistent evidence that seeing art, especially nature scenes can lower stress, pain, and anxiety, while also boosting patient satisfaction and well-being.

What do the numbers say? At the Cleveland Clinic, survey data showed that 73% of patients felt their mood improved after viewing art, 61% felt it helped reduce their stress, and 78% said the art positively shaped their impression of the hospital (Cleveland Clinic Arts & Medicine Institute, 2024). These findings echo results from other major hospitals, like Massachusetts General (68% reporting stress reduction) and Johns Hopkins (71% reporting improved mood) (Rollins et al., 2023).

Why nature imagery works so well: Simply being exposed to nature-themed art has shown surprisingly strong stress-reducing effects across many studies (Ulrich et al., 2023). Patients who viewed nature scenes had lower blood pressure, lower cortisol levels, and even shorter recovery times after surgery compared to those who viewed abstract art or no art at all (Park & Mattson, 2024). This seems to tap into our evolutionary preparedness for natural environments, which fits with ideas like attention restoration theory and the biophilia hypothesis (Kaplan, 1995; Wilson, 1984).

What patients prefer: Comparative studies suggest patients value visual art about as much as other forms of entertainment like TV or magazines, and they definitely notice when pleasing art is missing from a healthcare environment (Nanda et al., 2023). While most people tend to prefer representational art over abstract, this can vary. Surgical patients, for example, often lean toward calming nature scenes, while psychiatric patients may show a wider range of tastes (Lankston et al., 2024).

Active Art-Making Interventions

Recent work in neuroaesthetics has started to uncover why creating art can reduce stress. A 2025 experimental study in iScience (Dalebroux et al., 2025) compared painting to non-creative tasks and found that making art led to significantly greater anxiety reduction. This effect seemed to be driven by deeper cognitive engagement and changes in physiological reactivity.

Physiological mechanisms: Interestingly, painting triggered a higher heart rate than control tasks, especially in people who scored higher on trait creativity. And this greater physiological reactivity actually predicted a larger drop in anxiety. It suggests that the arousal that comes with creative activity might help set the stage for better emotional regulation afterward (Dalebroux et al., 2025). This pattern fits with other lab findings showing that art-making can help activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the body down after stress (Kaimal et al., 2024).

Flow states: Creating art is a reliable way to induce "flow"—that state of being completely immersed, losing track of time, and finding the activity intrinsically rewarding. And flow is known to help repair mood and reduce stress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Chick, 2023). Studies

that tweak the difficulty of an art task show that activities which induce flow lead to bigger reductions in state anxiety than tasks that are either too boring or too frustrating (Sinnamon et al., 2024).

The role of boredom: The anxiety-reducing benefits of art-making are weaker when people report being more bored during the activity (Dalebroux et al., 2025). This suggests that how engaged a person is really matters. It also hints that individual differences—like how interested someone is in art or how meaningful they find the task—can shape how well an intervention works.

Original Artworks vs. Reproductions

A fascinating study from King's College London compared how people's bodies responded to seeing original masterworks (by artists like Van Gogh, Manet, and Gauguin) in a gallery versus seeing high-quality reproductions in a lab (Clow & Fredhoi, 2024). The results were striking: the original artworks led to bigger drops in stress biomarkers (like cortisol and salivary alpha-amylase) and inflammatory markers (like C-reactive protein and interleukin-6).

The researchers described viewing art in a gallery as a kind of "cultural workout for the body." They suggest that the cumulative effects could potentially lower cardiovascular disease risk and even boost immune function (Clow & Fredhoi, 2024). What might explain this? Several factors could be at play: (a) the authentic experience of seeing the original work; (b) the inherently calming nature of gallery spaces; (c) the social aspect of visiting a museum; and (d) the focused attention we bring to a cultural outing (Chatterjee & Noble, 2025).

Economic and Population-Level Evidence

Beyond individual well-being, there's a growing economic case for arts-based stress reduction. Research done for the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport estimated that engaging with creative activities generates about £1,000 per person each year in combined benefits, from better productivity at work to lower healthcare use (DCMS, 2024). These figures come from long-term studies tracking health and service use among people in community arts programs.Healthcare organizations are paying attention. It's estimated that around 50% of US hospitals now have formal arts programs, aimed at improving patient outcomes and creating more healing environments (Society for Arts in Healthcare, 2025). Hospital administrators say their main reasons for starting these programs are to benefit patients (80% of programs), improve the environment (67%), and support staff well-being (45%) (State of the Field Survey, 2024).

Illustrative Examples of Artworks with Therapeutic Potential

To illustrate the concepts discussed in this review, five artworks are presented below. These pieces were selected not as a definitive list, but as representative examples of the aesthetic qualities calm nature, meditative space, emotional expression, rhythmic energy, and sublime awe that the literature suggests can facilitate psychological and physiological restoration.

Plate 1: *Feeling Calm*, Shurentsetseg Sukhbat (Shuren),
Oil on canvas, 23.6 × 15.8 in (60 × 40 cm), 2022

Plate 3: Peaceful Abide by Calista Nwosu,
Wool on fabric, 2022

Plate 4*: A Moment with Myself*, Elochukwu Chioma Jacinta (Chiomzzy Art-touch)
Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches, 2025

Plate 4: Blessings in Disguise (Motherhood),
Elochukwu Chioma Jacinta (Chiomzzy Art-touch)
24 x 36 inches, Acrylic on canvas, 2025

Engagement with fine art reduces stress and emotional fatigue through multiple interacting mechanisms—physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social.When we place an artwork like the aforementioned examples within a healthcare or workplace setting, we are not merely decorating a wall. We are introducing a therapeutic agent that works on multiple levels.

Physiologically, its soothing imagery can lower sympathetic arousal, as Clow & Fredhoi (2024) demonstrated with original artworks. Cognitively, it offers the viewer's overwhelmed attention a 'soft fascination', a chance to restore directed attention capacity without additional mental effort (Kaplan, 1995). Emotionally, it provides a container for feelings that may be too complex or painful to articulate, facilitating the kind of non-verbal processing Stuckey & Nobel (2023) describe as central to art's healing power. This artwork is therefore not an accessory to healing but it is part of the healing infrastructure itself.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Findings

The evidence we've reviewed consistently backs up the idea that engaging with fine art can help with stress reduction and managing emotional fatigue. Whether it's passive viewing or active creation, in a hospital, a studio, or a gallery, the benefits for psychological and physical well-being are measurable. The size of the effect varies depending on the type of intervention, how outcomes are measured, and who the participants are, but the overall pattern is remarkably steady.

An integrative model: Pulling the evidence together, a multi-level picture of art's therapeutic effects starts to emerge. On a physiological level, art seems to help balance the autonomic nervous system, turning down the body's stress response and supporting recovery (Kaimal et al., 2024). On a cognitive level, art captures our attention in a way that can interrupt the cycles of worry and rumination that come with stress and fatigue (Ulrich et al., 2023). On an emotional level, the pleasure and meaning we find in art can boost positive feelings and ease negative ones (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2024). And on a social level, sharing art experiences with others can fight the isolation and loneliness that often make emotional exhaustion worse (Clow & Fredhoi, 2024).

Mechanisms of Action

So, how does art do this? A few interconnected mechanisms seem key:

Attention restoration: Looking at nature scenes or other engaging artworks captures our attention without much effort, giving our directed attention a chance to rest and recharge, which reduces mental fatigue (Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich et al., 2023). This helps explain why nature-themed art works so well in healthcare.

Emotional regulation: Art gives us a way to express, process, and transform emotions without necessarily having to put difficult experiences into words (Stuckey & Nobel, 2023). For someone who's emotionally exhausted, this non-verbal route might be especially helpful.

Flow induction: Getting lost in making art creates a flow state—less self-consciousness, a different sense of time, and pure enjoyment—all of which are powerful antidotes to stress and rumination (Chick, 2023).

Physiological entrainment: The rhythmic nature of some art-making, like brushstrokes or mark-making, might help synchronise our body's rhythms, promoting a better balance in the nervous system (Dalebroux et al., 2025).

Moderating Factors

It's also clear that the therapeutic outcome isn't the same for everyone. It depends on a few key things:

· Individual differences: Things like a person's natural creativity, past experience with art, and what kind of art they prefer all play a role (Dalebroux et al., 2025). Tailoring the art experience to the individual might lead to better results.

· Art characteristics: For the general population, calming, representational nature scenes seem to be a safer bet for stress reduction than abstract art, though abstract work can be great for

specific groups (Lankston et al., 2024). And as we saw, original artworks have a more powerful effect than reproductions (Clow & Fredhoi, 2024).

· Environmental context: A thoughtfully designed gallery or healthcare space can boost the therapeutic effects compared to, say, a lab or just looking at art at home (Thompson et al., 2025).

· Intervention parameters: How long, how often, and in what format (alone or in a group, guided or self-directed) an art activity is offered also matters. We still need more research to figure out the "sweet spot" (Kaimal et al., 2024).

Limitations

Of course, this research has its limitations. First, a narrative synthesis, while useful for pulling together diverse studies, doesn't have the statistical precision of a meta-analysis. Second, it's possible that studies with positive results are more likely to be published, which could skew the picture. Third, many of the studies we looked at had small samples and short follow-up periods, which limits how much we can generalise the findings. Fourth, different studies define and measure stress and emotional fatigue in different ways, making it tricky to compare them directly. Fifth, most of this research has been done in Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations, so we don't know how well the findings translate to other cultures.

Future Research Directions

Where should research go from here? Some priorities include:

1. Mechanism-focused research: Designing experiments that directly test the proposed mechanisms—like attention restoration, flow, and emotional regulation—using formal mediation analyses.
2. Dose-response relationships: Systematically investigating the ideal "dose" of art interventions—how long, how often, and how intense they should be.
3. Comparative effectiveness: Running randomised controlled trials that directly compare art-based interventions to established methods like mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or exercise.
4. Neurobiological substrates: Using neuroimaging to pinpoint the brain systems involved in art's stress-reducing effects.
5. Implementation science: Studying the best ways to integrate arts interventions into real-world healthcare, workplace, and community settings.
6. Cultural adaptations: Investigating how art-based interventions work across different cultural contexts and aesthetic traditions.

Clinical and Policy Implications

The evidence we have now is strong enough to support some practical steps:

· Healthcare settings: Making visual art—especially nature imagery—a standard part of patient care areas. This means paying attention not just to what art is chosen, but where it's placed and how often it's rotated (Thompson et al., 2025).

· Workplace wellness: Including arts-based stress reduction programs in broader employee well-being initiatives, especially for jobs that are emotionally demanding (DCMS, 2024).

· Community health: Investing in public access to the arts and opportunities to participate in them could have real population-level mental health benefits. This is something public health policymakers should consider (Clow & Fredhoi, 2024).

· Clinical practice: Mental health professionals should think about referring patients to arts programs as a helpful addition to treatment for stress-related conditions. And art therapy should be a service that's accessible through healthcare systems (Stuckey & Nobel, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This review brings together evidence showing that engaging with fine art can make a real difference in reducing stress and emotional fatigue. The effects seem to work through several interacting pathways. Whether it's a calming nature scene in a hospital hallway calming an anxious patient, the immersive flow of making art in a studio, or a gallery visit where original masterpieces quietly shift our stress physiology, the therapeutic potential of art is increasingly backed by solid science.The fact that experimental, observational, and qualitative studies all point in a similar direction gives us more confidence in these findings. As one research team put it, "With rigorous, scientific study, this young field can inform hospital design, improve patient outcomes, and enhance the culture of healthcare" (Thompson et al., 2025, p. 12). Broadening that vision, art-based interventions could become a valuable part of our response to the global challenge of stress-related disorders. They offer an approach that is accessible, acceptable, and effective—one that honors the deep and lasting human connection between aesthetic experience and well-being.

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