

# Engaging the Arts for Library Employee Wellbeing

Libraries of all types provide resources that promote creative activity and boost the wellness of their respective communities in some way. When considering arts and wellbeing within the context of libraries, we may automatically think of resources and services for patrons. However, many libraries are also well-prepared to promote employee wellbeing via creative activities at informal meetups or during professional development sessions. In this article, I investigate how creative art-based activities support wellness, particularly with respect to employees. I also share insight on planning and promoting arts-based programs for library employees and give examples of creative projects that promote mindfulness and positive interpersonal relationships.

Wellbeing can incorporate many different facets of life, and as a broad concept, it has many definitions. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2019) defines wellbeing as “the comprehensive view of how individuals and communities experience and evaluate their lives, including their physical and mental health and having the skills and opportunities to construct meaningful futures” (p. 4). Wellbeing may refer to social, community, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual, or other types of wellness.

Like wellbeing, “the arts” can refer to a broad range of ideas. Involvement in the arts can be active, such as playing an instrument, forming a sculpture, or acting in a play. However, it can also be passive, such as listening to music, viewing a painting, or watching a theatre production. Participation in the arts is prevalent across the U.S., and has many benefits, such as boosting our overall wellbeing and even our productivity and creativity at work (Blumencweig, 2020). According to recent government data, 54% of U.S. adults attend creative arts or cultural activities; 54% create or perform art; 57% read short stories, novels, poems, or plays; and 74% use digital media to consume artistic content (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019).

## Literature Review

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), job stress is “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker,” and it is influenced by individual differences, workload demands, and workplace conditions (NIOSH, 2014). Workplace stress impacts our overall wellbeing and creates effects related to physiological disorders, such as gastrointestinal disorders; emotional disorders, such as inability to concentrate; and behavioral disorders, such as communication problems (Nekoranec, 2015).

When workplace stress becomes excessive, burnout can occur. Burnout is “a prolonged stress response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” and is defined by “the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy” (Maslach, 2016, p. 351). Individual factors, like personality type, can make some employees more at risk of burnout and its effects than others (Nekoranec, 2015). The effects of work stress and burnout extend beyond individual employees by affecting interpersonal relationships with others and social functioning. For example, employees experiencing burnout may disrupt job tasks, cause personal conflicts with coworkers, or exhibit hostile responses in the workplace (Maslach, 2016).

Job stress expands to life outside the workplace, impacting employees’ social and home lives. In a recent study, job stress was found to negatively predict job satisfaction among teachers and professors (Chen, 2016). The roles of educators and library staff both frequently include instructional duties, support services, and management of information or resources on others’ behalf. Though organizational environments, duties, and stressors differ across professions, when burnout impacts a person’s homelife, the process is referred to as “spillover” (Maslach, 2016).

Recent studies suggest that participation in passive or active arts activities can help to mitigate negative workplace effects, such as stress, on wellbeing. Library professionals are not specifically represented in this literature. Regardless, the studies show that both individual and group-based arts activities are used to promote wellness across a range of industries, indicating that they have the potential to benefit employees at libraries. Some studies refer specifically to art therapy activities, “art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship,” while others refer to more informal participation (American Art Therapy Association, 2022).

Creative arts therapy (CAT) uses visual, musical, physical, and written forms of art to increase resilience and decrease the effects of work stress. In a 12-week clinical trial of 20 healthcare professionals, group-based CAT activities helped to decrease burnout and increase perceived social support among participants (Mantelli et al., 2023). A 2017 study of hospice workers also focused on group-based art therapy activities, such as viewing and discussing artwork, creating visual art, and discussing other participants’ artwork. The activities were found to support creativity, increase communication, and provide some reduction of stress among several participants (Huet, 2017). A 2010 study of 60 health care workers showed that group-based art therapy activities, including collage, drawing, painting, and creative journaling decreased stress, improved communication and collaboration, and reduced anxiety (Visnola, 2010).

Arts-based interventions can also include individual activities that promote wellness in the workplace. In a 2019 study of 14 technology employees, coloring mandalas for 15-30 minutes allowed 79% of participants to detach from work during the activity, 21% to effectively think through work problems, 50% to clear their minds and “reset,” and 27.3% to feel less stressed (Peters, 2019). A 2017 pilot study showed that solitary arts interventions, including painting and drawing, helped employees to “externalize their stress and identify proactive ways to reduce uncomfortable feelings,” as well as boost feelings of confidence and control (Winlaw and Leotta, 2017, pg. 64). Passive arts engagement activities can also

support employee wellness and displaying art in the workplace can help allow employees to incorporate art as their individual schedules allow. A recent study of 19 non-profit employees found that displaying workplace art “promotes social interactions, generally enhances the workplace environment, elicits emotional responses, facilitates personal connection-making and fosters learning” (Smiraglia, 2014, pg. 287).

## **Assessment and Results**

I first considered the potential to bring arts to the library as an activity for employees after attending the Employee Wellness Institute (EWI) in fall 2022. This program is offered by East Carolina University to promote wellness across many aspects of life via discussions, reflections, presentations, and activities. One of these activities was an arts-based workshop in which my cohort painted flowerpots to give to friends or coworkers while discussing what it meant to “grow our social garden.”

Several months later, I presented a very similar program to my coworkers at our annual Academic Library Services’ (ALS) Staff Development Day. The theme for our annual event was “Team Building in the Library,” so this activity tied in well. My coworkers and I enjoyed the social, creative session and I felt inspired to provide similar opportunities to use my love for the arts to boost community, social, and individual wellness.

Shortly after the presentation, I created a “Craft Circle” with my coworkers to provide more opportunities for connection, expression, and the development of new skills in a relaxed and supportive environment. This informal club is open to everyone in ALS and usually occurs once per month for an hour. Previous activities have included watercolor painting, crochet, booklet-making, rock painting, faux stained glass, and ornament decorating.

There are currently over 20 ALS members on the Craft Circle mailing list, and I send monthly email updates to promote the next craft and meeting date. Additionally, every few months, I remind all ALS members (about 100 faculty and staff) of upcoming events to give new participants the opportunity to join the group. In addition to learning crafts during meetings, members suggest new crafts or lead the group in activities in which they have experience.

In May 2024, about a year after beginning Craft Circle, I created a brief, anonymous, informal assessment, which I sent to all ALS staff.

### ALS Arts Activities Informal Assessment

1. Which of the following events have you participated in?
  - Staff development arts-based breakout activity
  - “Drum Paint Club” meetings\*
2. Please mark each statement that applies to your experience at the event(s).
  - Working on an art/craft project alongside my coworkers provided a positive social opportunity.
  - I felt encouraged to use my creativity.
  - I learned a new skill or technique.
  - I was able to share encouragement or my own skills with others.
3. Which of the following would you be interested in participating in?
  - Additional professional development sessions with creative arts activities.
  - Additional Paint Club\* meetings and activities.
4. Do you have other suggestions or feedback?

\* “Paint Club” was the original name for Craft Circle.

I received nine responses, and considering that there were 20 members of Craft Circle, this means that about 45% of the members’ views were represented. The data shows that six individuals (66.7%) indicated they had attended a Craft Circle meeting while three individuals (33.3%) had attended a staff development arts-based breakout activity. All nine participants (100%) agreed with the statements: “Working on an art/craft project alongside my coworkers provided a positive social opportunity;” “I felt encouraged to use my creativity;” and “I was able to share encouragement or my own skills with others.”

Most respondents (six, or 66.7%) agreed with the statement “I learned a new skill or technique,” while two individuals (22.22%) disagreed and one person (11.11%) neither agreed nor disagreed. When asked about future events, all nine respondents (100%) indicated they would be interested in additional professional development sessions with creative arts activities and seven individuals (77.78%) would be interested in additional Craft Circle meetings and activities.

Three individuals (33.33%) gave additional feedback, including complimenting the activities, suggesting further promotion of the club, or expressing enjoyment of time spent with coworkers. One respondent shared, “I enjoy the creative activities because they are guided, and I am not especially creative,” which suggests the project templates and examples are helpful. Another respondent suggested “more promotion of ‘Paint Club,’ I heard about it once or twice and had no idea about how to join in,” and this comment indicates a need for increased communication about meetings. A third individual commented, “I really enjoyed the time spent with colleagues working on something outside of our usual scope of work. Something pleasantly productive but not detrimental to the formal operations of the library! I really hope this continues!” This response indicates social value in the programs and suggests they have not been distracting.

Although respondents were self-selected, the informal assessment indicates interest in continued arts activities for staff, including professional development opportunities and Craft Circle meetings. Furthermore, all respondents (100%) felt the activities were positive social opportunities that facilitated relationships with others. While this was simply an informal assessment rather than a rigorous research study, these findings suggest that participants find meaning and enjoyment in the opportunity to work on creative projects together at least as much as they find the sessions helpful for learning new skills.

The craft programs are intended to promote an enjoyable, inclusive co-working environment in which participants can share and celebrate their creative skills and find a new outlet for social well-being. These programs provide opportunities to support one another’s creative efforts, to practice mindfulness while making art, and to try new materials and techniques in a safe place. Because these considerations are at the forefront of the arts activities I plan, I am much less concerned with the development or refinement of art skills, though responses indicate most participants felt they experienced at least some growth in that respect.

## Tips for Planning Similar Programs

When planning activities for employees, it is important to consider the overall objective, difficulty, materials, and time to set up, work, and clean up. An objective could be related to professional goals, mental health, collaboration, or social health. Planners may choose to repurpose an activity by changing the objective. For example, participants at a staff development session may use collage techniques and images to create a “vision board.” The same materials and techniques could be used to create personalized retirement cards for a coworker. Aim for objectives that encourage some type of creative thinking or sharing as a group without assigning importance to 100% completion or mastering a technique.

In terms of project difficulty, planners may find it helpful to acknowledge they do not intend to teach art techniques at a high level. By keeping this mindset, they may select projects that do not require a significant investment of time from participants or expertise from themselves. The projects completed at ALS do not require prior art experience, nor a particular level of expertise. However, options are usually provided for increasing the difficulty level or complexity of the project. For example, simple crochet instructions can be provided as an option for beginners alongside instructions for a more advanced design that will appeal to an experienced crocheter. To make projects as accessible as possible, planners may provide an example of a completed project, brief written instructions, and verbal instructions. It is also helpful to offer templates as options when possible. Many individuals feel more certain of their ability to complete a craft project if given the option to trace or complete an existing design.

When selecting materials, planners may prioritize low-cost options that are easy to clean up. For example, if participants will be painting an object, craft acrylic paint is best. This type of paint is cheaper than artists’ acrylic paint, is much easier to clean up than oil paint, and does not create lingering fumes like latex paint. There are typically paints and other materials left over after each activity, which I add to a supply cart. Some items, such as paintbrushes, can be reused for a very long time and other items, such as glue and paint, usually last long enough to be used for two or more programs. Leftover items can inspire

new activities that do not require purchasing additional materials.

It is practical to prepare materials for projects ahead of time by priming surfaces, laying out supplies at each seat, pre-cutting paper, or completing other steps that will help participants move through the activity quickly and easily. For me, this is a necessary step when participants have between twenty minutes and an hour to work on activities. Participants usually work for the entirety of the planned time, so I tend to give reminders about time throughout the activity and to allot ten to fifteen minutes for cleanup at the end.

Planners should ask other employees for help cleaning and setting up, which makes it easier to facilitate activities and creates an opportunity for others to support programs. Seek out others’ skills and experience to give them a chance to lead groups and share their skills. Giving others a turn to teach a skill also gives the primary facilitator a break from planning activities for monthly Craft Circle meetings. Sometimes, Craft Circle works on the same craft for consecutive sessions to give others a chance to try the project or to allow participants more time to work.

I intentionally chose lunch time for Craft Circle sessions because this allows employees to join in during their lunch breaks, so they do not need to take additional time off work. I also encourage employees to bring their lunches to Craft Circle if they would like to. When planning arts programs that are not considered professional development opportunities, I recommend scheduling the sessions to coincide with logical break times. This attention to scheduling may increase participation.

The Informal Craft Circle sessions are useful in gauging interest in arts-based professional development opportunities and provide an informal test group to help identify potential challenges and solutions for more formal sessions. Optional lunchtime meetups are a low-pressure means of offering employees a chance to work on creative projects that can enhance personal as well as workplace community wellbeing. Reminders about events can be sent to all staff via email or message boards and photos of employees’ completed projects can help build interest in future craft sessions. For selected project ideas, please refer to Appendix A.

## Potential Future Research

Many of the observations included here focus on how arts-based activities promote employees' physical and emotional wellbeing via creative activities that decrease stress or facilitate mindful thinking. Future research may expand to better address the impact of arts on community, social, and organizational health. For example, it may include discussions of how crafting together promotes group unity and how arts activities can improve creative skills that translate into workplace solutions. Furthermore, the body of literature on this topic greatly lacks sufficient information and examples of arts-based activities for employees from a professional development, as opposed to a mental health or art therapy, perspective.

Evener (2015) asserts that a "key element of innovation is a library culture that cultivates creativity, encouraging employees to stretch their abilities, experiment with new ways of doing things, and accept and even celebrate mistakes" (p. 301). Additional research on arts activities at ALS can address how this new creative programming impacts employees and reveal shortcomings and limitations. Future research

may include surveys or interviews with a broader sampling of staff. These methods may address the effectiveness of project-specific outcomes, such as whether a coloring project helps employees improve focus. Further surveys or interviews may also address more general, longer-term outcomes, such as whether participating in monthly creative activities with co-workers boosts feelings of staff unity.



## Appendix A: Example Employee Arts Activities

### Project 1: Envision Change with Vision Boards



1. **Objective:** Use collage to create a visual representation of work or personal goal(s)
2. **Time:** 30 minutes
3. **Materials:**
  - Canvas, poster board, or cardstock
  - Images from magazines or picture books
  - Scissors
  - Glue sticks (suggested in place of school glue to minimize clean up)
4. **Preparation tips:**
  - Cut out several images ahead of time to reduce time (and vacuuming)
  - Offer different colors of poster board/canvas/ etc.
  - Plan 10 minutes at the end for optional sharing

**Project 2:  
Growing Our Social Garden**



1. **Objective:** Paint a flowerpot and add a succulent as a gift for a coworker
2. **Time:** 1 hour
3. **Materials:**
  - Terracotta pots
  - Acrylic paint
  - Paint brushes and paper plates (to use as pallets)
  - Cups of water
  - Soil/succulents (optional)
4. **Preparation tips:**
  - Bring 1-2 hairdryers to speed up the activity.
  - Spray paint pots white before the event to prime them.
  - Offer stickers or die cut shapes as for tracing templates, remind participants that simple designs like stripes or polka dots are an option.

**Project 3:  
Rock-Painting Mindful Mandalas**



1. **Objective:** Practice mindfulness while painting patterns on rocks
2. **Time:** 1 hour
3. **Materials:**
  - Smooth rocks
  - Acrylic paint
  - Paint brushes and paper plates (to use as pallets)
  - Cups of water
5. **Preparation tips:**
  - Paint the top of some rocks a solid base color to provide interesting options.
  - Demonstrate using end (not bristles) of paintbrush to make the dots, starting at center and moving outward to edge of rock.
  - Encourage participants to practice mindfulness by focusing on creating a pattern instead of worrying about daily stressors or the final appearance of the project.



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