

## **Valley News, Forum, May 8, 2022 Celebrate Mental Health Awareness Month with the arts**

Somewhere along the line, our brains developed a keen sense of longing for art. From personal adornment and the rituals of song, dance and storytelling in nomadic times to the present day, we enjoy art in many forms.

Out of these aesthetic experiences comes the field of study known as neuroaesthetics. Neuroaesthetic research explores how the brain rewards us when we enjoy art by secreting feel-good brain chemicals like oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine. These chemicals trigger sensations of pleasure, reducing stress and anxiety.

Research also reveals that aesthetic experiences impact our bodies, such as changes in breathing, heart rate and skin responses.

According to the AVA Gallery and Art Center's exhibition manager, Samantha Eckert, "For me, maintaining an artwork practice is integral to keeping my anxiety at bay. I believe an active right brain is essential to a healthy state, body and mind."

Neuroaesthetic researchers would agree. Rhyme and rhythm in poetry have similarities to the visual arts. Video recordings of poetry readings showed participants getting chills and goose bumps while feeling intense emotions as they listened.

These physical responses happen at the same time as the right hemisphere of the brain processes metaphor to integrate meanings of two unrelated concepts. Art, through poetry, stretches the body and mind to help it process feelings and conceptual notions simultaneously.

It seems appropriate, then, that poetry populates the walls of the AVA Gallery's latest exhibition, *The Thing With Feathers*, alongside visual art created by many local artists and poets. This exhibition is a collaborative effort between AVA and West Central Behavioral Health to recognize and celebrate May as National Mental Health Awareness Month.

All month long, we can elevate our moods by enjoying art in its many forms — the visual, the written, the performative, the spoken, the sung, and even through the sheer enjoyment of the natural beauty that surrounds us here in the Upper Valley. Let's get goose bumps together, laugh a little, de-stress and enjoy time with art throughout the month. It'll make us all feel good.

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