How Practicing Heritage Art Can Calm Anxiety

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Learn simple ways creating art can boost mental well-being and build resilience through connection to your history, your community, and yourself.

There’s a certain kind of joy that comes from making things with your hands. Time slows down, play takes over, the world outside quiets a little, and your focus narrows to the simple rhythm of creating. This playful act transforms. It becomes something deeper, almost sacred, like a dance between your hands, your history, and your heart.

Making art is a healing practice. **New research** from Drexel University found that engaging in heritage arts, creative traditions passed down through families and communities, can significantly reduce anxiety and negative feelings while boosting positive mood. These practices do more than fill time; they help ground us emotionally and strengthen our mental well-being.

Heritage arts encompass diverse creative expressions rooted in cultural and familial legacies. These include indigenous art forms that often carry deep spiritual or communal significance, as well as traditional crafts maintained and adapted within families and communities over time, such as quilting, pottery, or textile work. Far from mere hobbies, these practices serve as living connections to our identities, histories, and sources of emotional strength.

How Heritage Arts Boost Mental Health

A recent **Drexel University study** led by Dr. Girija Kaimal compared the effects of

heritage artmaking to puzzle solving on anxiety and mood. Participants from the U.S., Japan, and India spent 45 minutes either practicing a heritage art of their choice or working on a jigsaw puzzle.

The results? Heritage arts lowered anxiety and negative feelings more than puzzles, while also boosting positive mood. The key difference: heritage arts offer meaningful connection, **creative freedom**, and hands-on engagement, qualities puzzles alone can't match.

Engaging in these practices taps into core psychological needs we all share: autonomy, mastery, and belonging. Choosing an art form connected to your roots or personal history offers a pathway to deeper mental well-being.

Six Heritage Art Traditions to Explore for Mental Wellness

1) Fiber and Textile Arts

Knitting, crocheting, quilting, and weaving are rituals that soothe the mind. The repetitive motions engage your brain's rhythm centers, helping reduce stress and induce a relaxed state. Studies show these **fiber arts support emotional balance**, social connection (especially in group settings), and a sense of pride. Whether you pick up a ball of yarn or a needle and thread, these tactile arts build focus and community.

2) Painting and Drawing Traditions

Styles like Japanese calligraphy or Indian Madhubani painting bring intention and mindfulness to the act of mark-making. These traditions often embody cultural stories

and spiritual symbolism, grounding you in a narrative larger than yourself. **Research on calligraphy** finds that its flowing movements can calm the nervous system and improve concentration, making it a powerful tool for emotional regulation.

4) Pottery and Claywork

Clay engages your senses directly: the texture and coolness of clay, the scent, the play of pressure needed to mold. Clay connects you physically to the present moment, helping to ground anxiety and encourage flow. For example, clay has been shown in **clinical studies** to boost mood and support emotional expression.

5) Textile and Fabric Arts

Textile arts like knitting, quilting, and weaving are more than crafts, they're healing heritage practices. A **2011 study** of 800+ women found those using fiber arts to shift mood felt more rejuvenated and engaged. These arts combine tactile rhythm, creative mastery, and beauty, helping reduce stress and ground emotions. Regional textile arts like India's phulkari embroidery or traditional weaving practices carry stories of place and people. Their meditative nature supports relaxation and emotional balance.

6) Other Traditional Practices

Some heritage arts are communal and ritualistic, basket weaving, paper art, woodworking, beadwork, or mask making bring people together and cultivate shared meaning. These practices can help us feel rooted in community and tradition, essential factors in sustaining mental health as we age.

Finding Your Heritage Art: A Personal

Path to Calm and Connection

The beauty of heritage arts is that they're as unique as our own stories. You don't need to be an expert or have "art skills" to practice. The key is choosing an art that feels meaningful to you, whether that means reconnecting with a craft from your family, exploring the traditions of your community, or discovering an art form tied to the land you live on or the land your ancestors came from.

Ask yourself: What creative practices did your parents or grandparents cherish? What materials or techniques feel familiar or call to you? What traditions are rooted in the place you call home? Sometimes, even starting with curiosity and respect for these practices can open a door to a deeper sense of calm and belonging.

Remember, heritage arts aren't just about honoring the past, they're living, breathing practices that ground us in the present. By making time for your chosen art, you're giving yourself permission to slow down, nurture your mental well-being, and build resilience through connection to your history, your community, and yourself.

Take a Moment to Create Calm in 20 Minutes

1. **Choose your medium:** Pick a heritage or traditional art practice that feels meaningful or intriguing. It can be knitting, calligraphy, clay shaping, embroidery, or even decorative knot tying.
2. **Set a timer:** Give yourself 20 minutes, no pressure, no expectations.
3. **Focus on the process:** Notice the textures, rhythms, and movements of your medium. Let your attention rest on the simple act of creating.
4. **Breathe and be present:** If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the tactile experience.
5. **Reflect:** Afterward, take a moment to notice any changes in your mood, anxiety, or sense of connection.

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