

The Yarnfulness Project

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Creative projects can be a welcome diversion from the stresses and annoyances of daily life. Those of us who knit or crochet often intuitively feel that this has a positive effect on our lives – whether it is due to the joy of creating, the fun of learning something new or the triumph of finally mastering a difficult pattern.

But is there any scientific evidence that crafting has positive benefits? This question interested us, as researchers who are also crafters – and it's a question we've been asked by members of the public, who often have a vague sense that crafting might lead to positive results but wonder whether there is scientific evidence. People who enjoy knitting or crocheting have told us that the repetitive nature of the craft can feel quite meditative and that they find it helps them with stress relief. Some people have compared it to mindfulness or meditation, which are certainly linked to positive mental health benefits.

We looked at the scientific literature to see what kind of evidence has been collected. One research group¹ did an international survey of knitters and found that they reported health and wellbeing benefits, including happiness, feelings of calm and increased social contact for those who did their knitting in a group setting. However, not much work has been done on why this might be, or what physical effects might be related to this feeling of calm (lowered heart rate? Lowered blood pressure? A decrease in stress hormones?) We thought it would be interesting to dig into this a little more deeply. For example, there are several ways that knitting or crochet could help mental health – by distracting from stressful thoughts, by fostering socialisation, by encouraging creativity or by helping people to stay focussed on the present – but we don't yet have solid evidence for any of these.

One way that knitting or crochet might have a positive impact is by encouraging a state of “flow”. The term flow has been used by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe an altered mental state brought on by concentrating on a challenging task. It is a state of complete absorption in the task in which the outside world seems to disappear, as attention is focussed entirely on the task at hand. It's clear that such a state could lead to a pleasant feeling of joy in the work and relief from stresses and worries. Indeed, even if the project does not take up all of your attention, focussing closely on a creative task could break the loop of negative thoughts that is common in depression or anxiety.

Before we start looking at specific research questions, we want to talk to as many crafters as possible to find out whether people feel that crafting helps their mental or physical health, and if so, what kinds of benefits it seems to bring. We also want to know what research questions are the most important to crafters, and would like to recruit a few people to help us design the research so it is more likely to answer the questions that are important to people who knit or crochet. Our goal is to use this feedback to help direct the research and make sure we address the most relevant questions.

We've put together a website (<https://yarnfulnessproject.org>) to gather feedback about this research and about peoples' experiences of crafting. If you are interested in this line of research, you can keep up to date with the project on the Yarnfulness website. We'd love to hear from as many people as possible, so please get in touch with us and have your say.

1. Riley J, Corkhill B, Morris C. The Benefits of Knitting for Personal and Social Wellbeing in Adulthood: Findings from an International Survey. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 2013; **76**(2): 50-7.