

Cultured Men Are Happier, Study Finds

Stephanie Pappas, LiveScience Senior Writer

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Men who enjoy taking in the ballet or browsing art museums are more likely to be happy with their lives and satisfied with their health than men who don't enjoy the finer things in life, a new study finds.

And although greater enjoyment of cultural activities is associated with higher income, the arts have a beneficial effect regardless of other factors that might influence health and happiness, including socioeconomic status.



The results suggest that encouraging cultural participation may be one way to encourage healthfulness, the authors reported online May 23 in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

"There has been a focus on physical activity as an instrument to promote good health in the last decades, but who is sure that all people are equally capable of doing five days a week of intensive training?" said study author Koenraad Cuypers of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in an email to LiveScience. "I doubt it! Studies suggest that 50 percent of leisure time is spent in other activities than physical activity, so we aimed at investigating whether participation in cultural activities would also be associated with good health/good satisfaction with life/low anxiety and depression."

Leisure and stress

Previous research found that leisure activities can reduce stress and improve mental health. But it occurred to Cuypers that there are two ways to participate in cultural activities. These are "creative culture," in which a person is involved in a hands-on way; and "receptive culture," in which a person absorbs a performance by someone else. Creative culture includes club participation, singing in a choir or doing volunteer work. Receptive culture includes such activities as visiting museums and watching plays or musicals.

Cuypers his colleagues collected data on the activities, life satisfaction, perceived health, anxiety and depression of 50,797 adult residents of Nord-Trøndelag County in central Norway. Controlling for factors such as income and education, the researchers found that cultural participation is good for well-being for both genders.

Church attendance and going to sports events were linked to increased life satisfaction in women; women who attended sports events also were more likely to describe themselves as healthy. Men felt healthier when they did volunteer work and participated in associations, outdoor activities and physical exercise. Strikingly, the researchers found that all receptive cultural activities, whether musical, theatrical or artistic, were also associated with good health in men.

"Men seemed to get more of a perceived [health benefit](#) from being involved in different receptive cultural activities than women did," Cuypers said, adding that in both genders, there was a dose-response effect: The more activities a person participated in, the happier they tended to be.

Health, happiness and gallery openings

In other studies, Cuypers wrote, high cultural participation has been linked to increased physical activity, suggesting that a taste for the arts is a marker for an otherwise healthy lifestyle. However, the gender difference between men and women suggests other factors, including stress reduction, may be at play.

Cuypers said the results would likely hold true for other European populations, but more work is needed to understand when and how cultural activities boost health. The study did not follow participants over time, so researchers can't be certain whether there is a cause-and-effect relationship between cultural activities and perceived health and happiness. Currently, Cuypers said, he is investigating interactions between genes and the environment to understand the connection between culture and health.

"There is a tremendous need for research," Cuypers said.