

THE STRESS LESS PENCIL

ART & MENTAL HEALTH

ISSUE 01



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for Mental Health

Does art make you happy?

Mental Well-Being at Work
How to do it right

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DOES ART MAKE YOU HAPPY?

Depression, anxiety, stress, everywhere you look these days. While human living conditions have been improving over time, our mental health seems to be declining.

But the mental health crisis we are living in also has a silver lining. Public discourse about our mental well-being is more open than ever - we are happier to talk with others about how we are really feeling. We are more open to seeking professional help, study and research on the subject is ever increasing, and we are learning how we can take care of our mental health pro-actively.

Besides exercise, a healthy diet, and strong relationships, art is one of the many ways through which we can boost our well-being.

Art makes you happier

Art is a great way to feel happier, even if you don't think it is. The science of positive psychology focuses on the idea that we can make our own lives better, and it turns out that art is one of the ways we can do this:

- Art helps us feel more connected to others. When you see something beautiful or inspiring in art, it helps make you feel connected to others—to humanity as a whole.
- Art reduces stress levels for people who work in high-pressure jobs and those who live with chronic pain by improving moods and reducing symptoms of anxiety or depression.
- Art makes people relax more quickly than other activities such as watching TV or listening to music

By studying the physiological responses of viewers looking at art in museums, researchers have shown that viewing an artwork can elicit a remarkable range of positive health benefits.



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Electroencephalogram (EEG) recordings reveal that viewing an art shows a pattern in brain activity similar to that experienced when we fall in love. It also lowers blood pressure and heart rates, and reduces anxiety and distress.

Painting is one of the oldest forms of human expression. The earliest paintings date back to the Upper Paleolithic period, around 40,000 years ago. Since then, artists have explored new ways to express their emotions through art. If you've ever gone to an art museum or gallery, you know that it can be a powerful experience—one that leaves you feeling inspired and uplifted.

Art adds years to your life

The benefits of art are well-documented, but worth repeating: increased longevity, lower stress and anxiety, reduced depression, increased happiness and energy levels and more positive emotions.

Researchers found that people who attended cultural events regularly were 31% less likely to die over a 14-year follow up period than those who didn't. It is thought that the same internal biochemical pathways related to stress reduction are activated when we engage with art as when we engage in contemplative or meditative practices such as yoga or tai chi.



Art keeps you sharp mentally

Art is a form of mental exercise, and it keeps your brain active. The left side of the brain is responsible for logical thinking, while the right side is responsible for emotional perception. Just like physical exercise helps both sides of our bodies, so does art: when we create something with our hands, our right brains are activated; when we discuss or critique art with others, our left brains are activated.

It is commonly accepted that older people who are actively engaged mentally tend to maintain their cognitive skills better than those who aren't. Therefore, one way to prevent cognitive decline is through engagement with art, which exercises the left side of the brain (responsible for logical thinking), while simultaneously engaging the right side of the brain (responsible for emotional perception).

So, if you're feeling a little down and out, go to a museum, or grab that brush or pencil and start creating some art. You don't have to be an artist to benefit from these positive effects; just doing something creative for fun can help you feel good about yourself and improve your mental health.

Art Prompt

Be more of your awesome self

Step 1: Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on the things you appreciate most about yourself. What are your skills and qualities that you are most proud of? What comes easy to you and let's you contribute in a way that's aligned with your values?

Are you very good at learning? Or listening? Or cooking?

Which activity can you get lost in?

Where do you feel most like yourself?

I also recommend taking the VIA Strength Survey, a scientifically backed questionnaire to help you identify your positive qualities.

Step 2: Choose a quality

Out of the many qualities you have identified, choose one or two that you want to start amplifying. Which ones can you lean in even further this year? Which ones will help you bring more joy to your life and those of others?

Step 3: Draw

Create a picture that represents those qualities. You can draw, collage, take a photo, or work in any other medium you like. Keep the picture closeby, maybe on your desk or as a wallpaper on your mobile, so you get reminded often to lean into the awesomeness that you already are.



My Example

It's been a bit of a process, but I've been getting out of my head and into my body. Meditating, walking the dog, getting more active again in the gym and the pool, creating things with my hands.

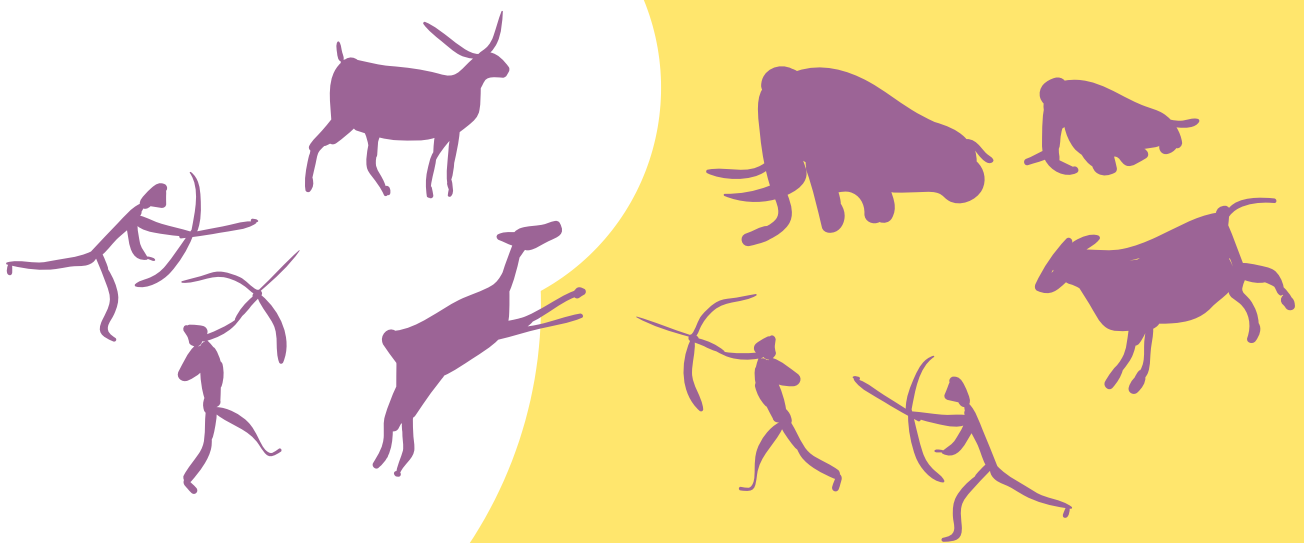
I also want educating myself more about mental health, well-being, the role of creativity, and the connection between body and mind to be more deliberate in what I'm doing.

Homo Creativus

Humans are programmed for art, and it's good for our mental health

Humankind has been drawing and producing art since the beginning of time. From cave paintings, like the ones in Lascaux caves in France, estimated to be around 17,000 years old, to the contemporary art installations of today, art has always been a means of human expression, communication, and connection. Whether it was to record history, or express the unseen, spiritual world.

The ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphics to tell stories and convey important information, while the Greeks used sculptures to honor their gods and heroes. Fast forward to the Renaissance, where the likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo produced masterpieces that are still admired today. All the way to the modern art movements of the 20th century like cubism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism that changed the art world forever.



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Why are we so drawn to creating and appreciating art?

Some scientists think it's just a byproduct of our highly developed brains that allows us to imagine and create things that don't exist in the natural world. Others believe it serves an evolutionary purpose, like helping us bond with others or signal our status to potential mates.

Whatever the reason, art has always been and will always be a vital part of human culture. It's exciting to think that not much has changed in some ways. Just like our ancestors, we too have the ability to create and express ourselves through art.

Whether it's through painting, sculpture, music, or dance, art has the power to bring us together and make us feel alive.

On a recent episode of his podcast "Diary of a CEO", host Steven Bartlett discussed how, in his view, taking care of our well-being almost seems to boil down to simply becoming more human again. Doing what our early ancestors did: spending time outside, working out, being part of a tribe, eating whole foods, and, of course, drawing on walls.



Art Prompt

Speed-drawing your friends

Version 1 - In a Group

This is a great activity to do in a group - maybe at the beginning of a team-building workshop, or at the next party with your friends.

Divide the group into 2 lines of people, facing each other. Each person should sit opposite a person from the other group, with some art supplies at hand (paper, pen, crayons). Think Speed Dating!

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Once the timer starts, each pair has 5 minutes to sketch portraits of each other. Of course, the portraits should not be too detailed, there isn't enough time for photo realism! Just draw what you see, including some of the more stand-out features of the person in front of you.

Once finished, one row of people will move down a seat and draw the person they are now sitting opposite of.

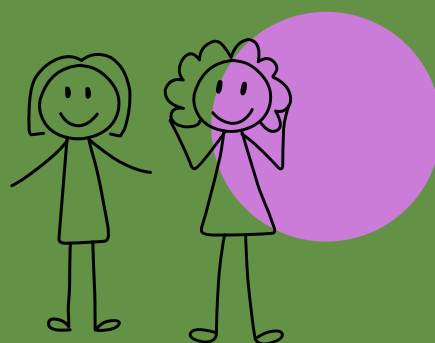
You can continue this until each person has drawn every person from the other group. Or until your drunk friend (you know the one) proposes that it's time to go streaking instead!

Version 2 - By yourself

Of course, it's not always feasible to get a group together on short notice. If you want to try this activity you can also do this at home.

Get yourself some paper and pens/pencils/markers. Set a timer for 5 or 10 minutes. During each set, sketch a portrait of one of the important people in your life. You can try sketching them from memory - the upside of doing this activity alone is that nobody will see what you draw - or bring up a photo of the person to use as a reference.

Feel free to share your sketches with the people you have drawn. I'm very sure they'll appreciate it.



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MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK



Why companies need to care about the mental well-being of their staff

As companies continue to navigate the ever-changing landscape of the modern workforce, one aspect that has become increasingly important is the mental well-being of employees.

With the rise of mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is increasingly important for companies to realize that the workplace is a big part of people's mental health. We do spend a large part of our waking hours at work, after all.

Many people think that increasing flexibility at work, such as working from home, means that people will be happier. And, of course, for those who can use this flexibility to their advantage, it has massive benefits. However, there is also a downside to not being as connected to our teams and colleagues as we used to be. It is harder to notice if somebody is slipping down into a depression when they are isolating themselves at home and only working through their screens. People themselves might not even notice the effect that working in their pajamas all day might have on them. Even though at first, it might seem like a sweet gig.

Apart from the obvious human answer that it's the right thing to do to care about other people, one of the main reasons why companies should care about the mental well-being of their staff is the impact it has on productivity.

Studies have shown that employees who are struggling with mental health issues are more likely to take time off work, be less productive while on the job, and have a higher risk of burnout.

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By providing a work environment that supports employees and their well-being, companies can improve productivity and reduce the negative impact that mental health issues can have on the workplace.

Another important reason is the impact it has on employee retention. Employees who feel supported and valued by their employer are more likely to stay with the company long-term. On the other hand, employees who feel unsupported and neglected are more likely to leave the company, leading to high turnover rates and the need to constantly train new employees. This is especially important in times of "The Big Resignation" and "Quiet Quitting." If you want to keep your talent, you need to care about and for them.

In short, a happy team is a productive team that sticks with you for the long run.

Many companies are waking up to this fact and are actively implementing well-being programs for their staff, including employee assistance programs, providing mental health days, and promoting a culture of openness and support. Much like greenwashing, there are many companies that are "mental health washing" because they let people leave 30 minutes early on a Friday evening.

However, companies who are serious about implementing long-term actions that will positively affect their employee's mental health can look to the science of Positive Psychology for answers.

The factors that contribute to our well-being - positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement - can and should be implemented at work just as much as at home.

In the long term, the companies that manage to create a positive work environment will be the ones retaining the best talent with the highest productivity. And the others, who decide that "employee well-being is not a priority right now," will eventually go the way of the dodo.



Art Prompt

Find the positive emotions in your life

Step 1: What emotions?

First, let me tell you which positive emotions we're talking about here. Because fortunately for us, there are many.

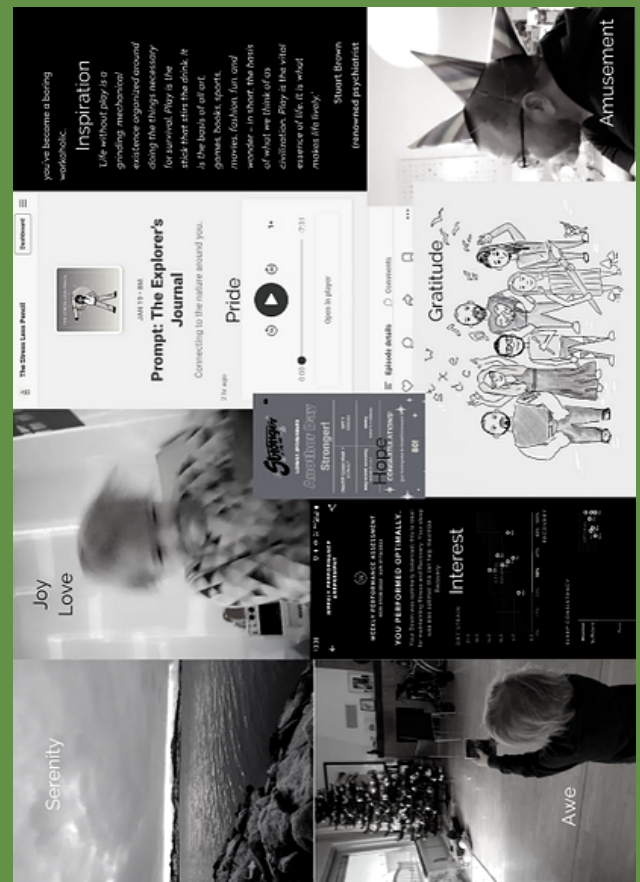
Take out a piece of paper and note down the following list:

- Joy
- Love
- Gratitude
- Serenity
- Interest
- Hope
- Pride
- Amusement
- Inspiration
- Awe

Step 2: Find photos

Now go and find some pictures. You can either go through the camera roll on your phone or your old photo albums (do people still have those? *notes down prompt idea for creating a photo album*... ok, moving on)

Find one photo for each of the positive emotions on our list. The link between the photo and the emotion doesn't have to be super obvious, as long as it makes sense to you.



Step 2.1 (optional): Collage

If you want you can print out your photos, or use an online tool like Canva to create a collage of your positive emotions.

Step 3: Notice

Now that you've identified some past positive emotions, try and identify them in your life as they happen. Notice when you're feeling grateful, or inspired, or amused, and make a little mental note.



Mental Health and Well-Being at Work

How to do it right

The world of work has changed dramatically since the pandemic. Companies had to figure out how to work remotely, and how to switch entire businesses online. Of course, there are many upsides of this disruption - hello digitalisation and more flexible working - but obviously, there were a whole lot of downsides as well.

As people suffered from the negative consequences of those changes - isolation, loss, uncertainty - companies had to face the importance of their staff's well-being for everyone involved. We are finally seeing more and more conversations on the topic.

What is the role of the company in their employee's well-being? What can they really do? What works, and what doesn't?

Some companies have already implemented thorough well-being programs, some might offer initiatives like yoga classes, and others continue to ignore the subject altogether.

There are many sources that will tell you what to do, but as in the personal development and self-help sector, some are more credible than others. B

THE STUDY OF WELL-BEING

If we want to improve and maintain people's well-being, we have to act before it's too late. We want to try and avoid burnout, and depression, not just fix it. Focusing on increasing the positive rather than fixing the negative is precisely the objective of Positive Psychology, which is the scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, with a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, building the good in life instead of repairing the bad, and taking the lives of average people up to "great" instead of focusing solely on moving those who are struggling up to "normal" (Peterson, 2008 - via positivepsychology.com).

We can very much think of it as a parallel to the world of physical well-being, where Salutogenesis studies the origins of health and focuses on factors that support human health and well-being and Pathogenesis on factors that cause disease. In other words, there are things we can do for our bodies - staying fit and active, eating healthily, and sleeping enough - that allow us to stay strong and healthy.

And there are doctors to help us for when things go wrong and we need help to make them right. One does not replace the other, the two work hand in hand. And if we focus on keeping up the positive, hopefully, we'll need a lot less of fixing the





Positive Psychology, spearheaded by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, identifies five main factors (in addition to physical health) that contribute to our overall well-being:

P

Positive Emotions

Feelings of joy, happiness, love, amusement, etc.

E

Engagement

Being engrossed in our work, losing track of time, getting into a state of Flow.

R

Relationships

Having strong and meaningful relationships with our peers.

M

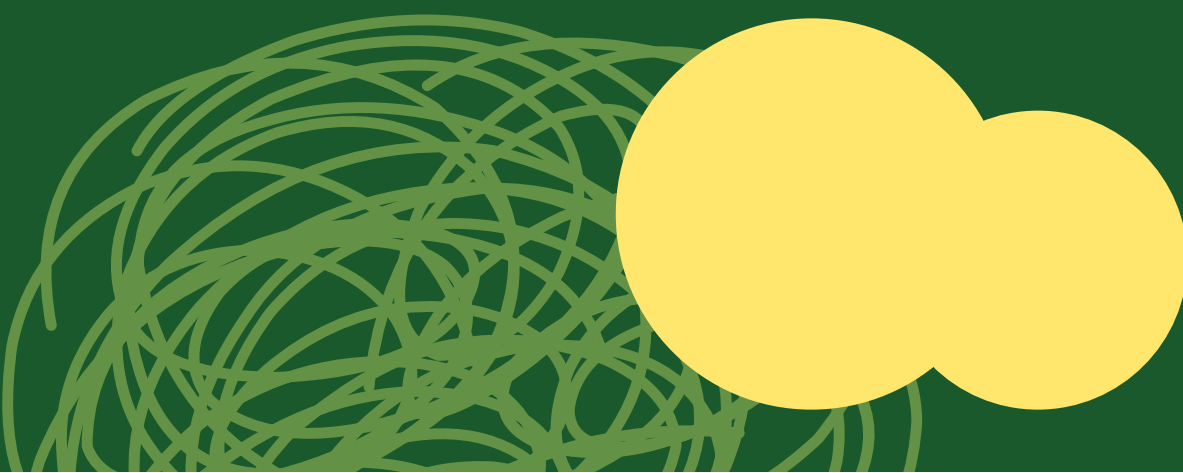
Meaning

Having a sense of purpose, feeling part of something bigger than ourselves.

A

Achievement

Feeling that we have accomplished something, that we succeeded in what we set out to do.

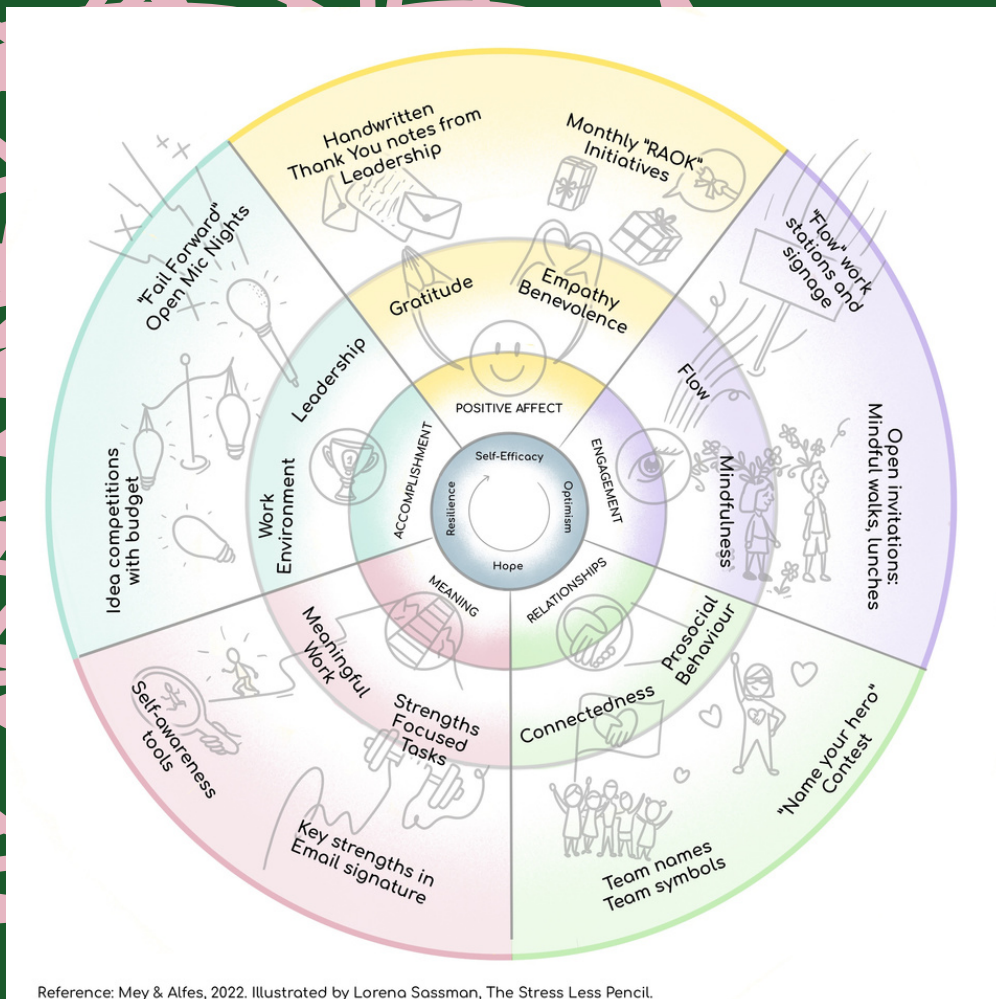


How can a company assure Engagement and Flow at work? How can we actually help people feel accomplishment and meaning?

In their 2022 article, Christin Mey and Kerstin Alfes from the ESCP Business School in Berlin identified how to translate the PERMA model into the workplace to improve staff well-being and resilience.

The Well-Being at Work Wheel translates the 5 elements of PERMA into 10 factors for well-being, each with a practical workplace implementation that allows companies to make well-being part of the culture in the long run.

From identifying employees' key strengths and identifying them in their email signature, to Flow stations, and random acts of kindness - these actions are easy to implement and will help your team flourish, in a scientifically proven way.



The Well-Being at Work Wheel & Art

The subject of mental health is often a bit tricky to approach, even - or especially - for those in need of well-being initiatives. Many people do not like to open up about their emotions, especially in the workplace. Companies wanting to implement well-being programs therefore might even face some resistance.

This is why, at the Stress Less Pencil, we use art and creative activities in order to make this subject more accessible (and fun) to companies and their teams. In our workshops, we discuss the PERMA model and use our creativity to take the first steps toward making these changes.

If our analysis for instance reveals that your team would most benefit from strengthening the PERMA components "Meaning" and "Relationships", we would do an exercise on identifying strengths in one another and draw these as superheroes. After the workshop, the participants are invited to permanently include their identified strengths in their email signatures to create a visible and long-lasting effect.

This allows companies to offer their teams a fun experience, while at the same time taking the first steps to implement a scientifically proven well-being strategy in the long term.



Art Prompt

Make a mess

Step 1: Choose your playground

Find a big piece of paper, cardboard, canvas, fabric, wood, or whatever else you're happy to get messy on. This should be at least A3 in size, in order to give yourself some space to properly express yourself.

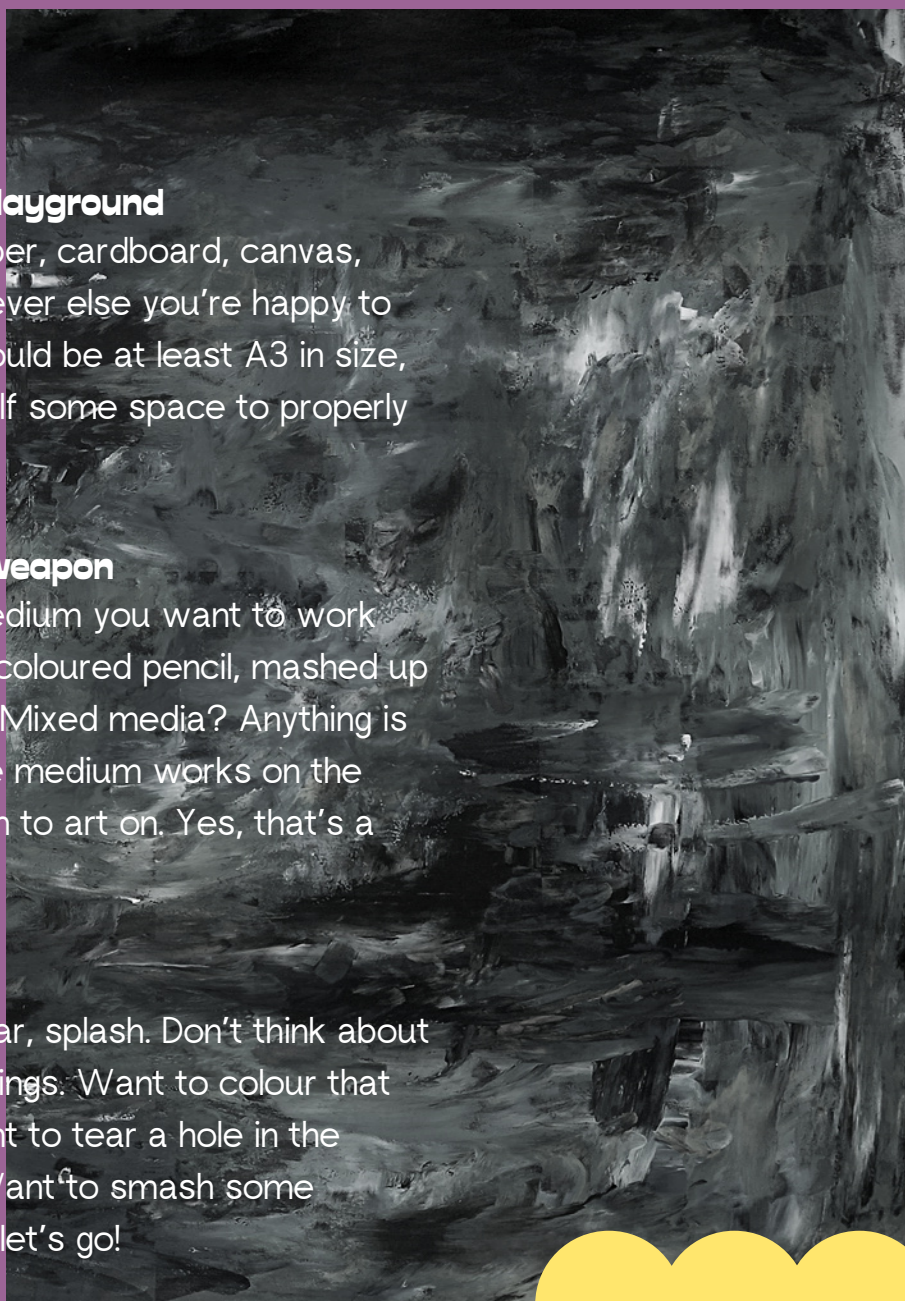
Step 2: Choose your weapon

Now choose which medium you want to work with. Paints, markers, coloured pencil, mashed up fruit, coffee grounds? Mixed media? Anything is allowed, as long as the medium works on the material you've chosen to art on. Yes, that's a verb.

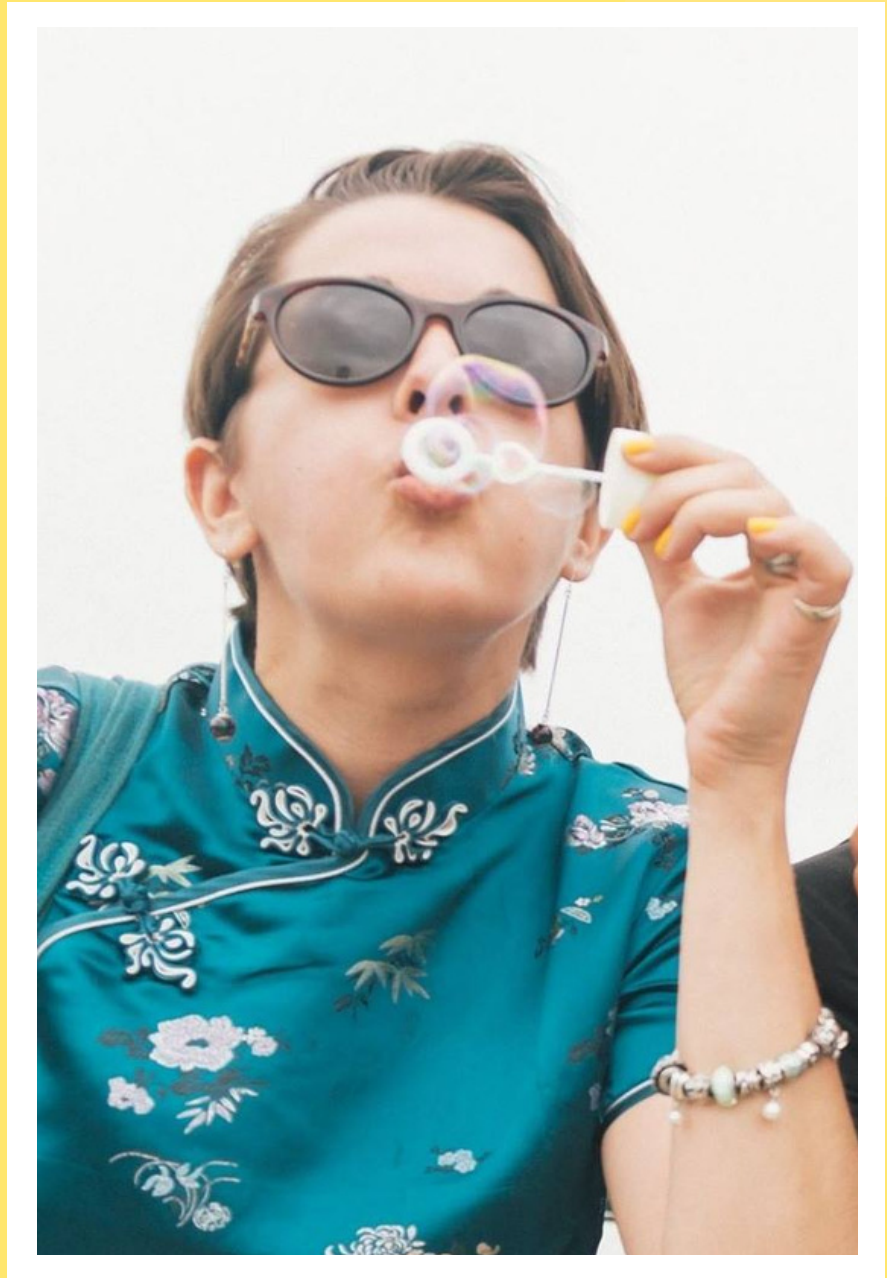
Step 3: Go nuts

Draw, paint, glue, smear, splash. Don't think about it, just follow your feelings. Want to colour that corner red? Do it! Want to tear a hole in the middle? Great idea! Want to smash some blueberries on it? F it, let's go!

Like most things in life, this is best done with some loud music in your ears. Continue until you're done. Enjoy yourself. You're done whenever you feel like you've let it all out.

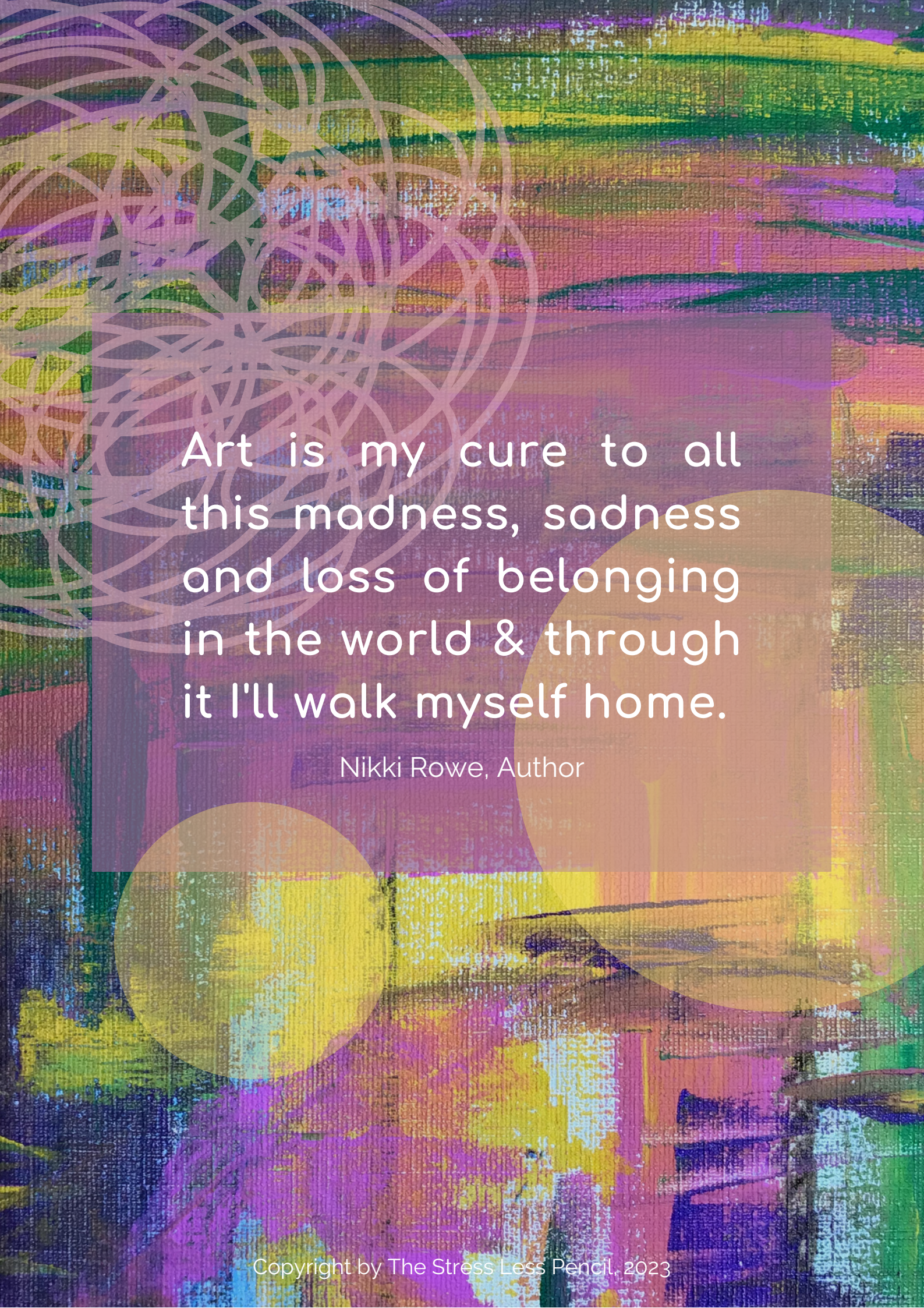


ABOUT



Hi, I'm Lorena and I publish this magazine as part of The Stress Less Pencil, where I help companies and individuals to improve their mental health through art.

On thestresslesspencil.com you sign up to receive this monthly magazine by email, you can also find out more about our workshops, weekly art prompts, and more.

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of thick, textured brushstrokes in shades of purple, green, yellow, and blue. A large, intricate circular scribble made of overlapping white and light purple lines is positioned in the upper left quadrant. Two large, semi-transparent circles, one yellow and one orange, are overlaid on the lower half of the image. The text is centered within a semi-transparent purple rectangular area.

Art is my cure to all
this madness, sadness
and loss of belonging
in the world & through
it I'll walk myself home.

Nikki Rowe, Author