

## Health & Science

# Might crafts such as knitting offer long-term health benefits?

By **Amanda Mascarelli** April 21, 2014

When I picked up knitting needles for the first time about two years ago, I couldn't have imagined how vital the hobby would become to my well-being. Learning to knit was hard for me, but once I mastered it, the craft became addictive, in a good way: It calmed me and helped me to write and to deal with the frustrations of motherhood.

Crafters have long recognized the therapeutic value of activities such as knitting and crocheting. (A [2013 survey](#) of more than 3,500 knitters worldwide, for example, found that 81.5 percent of respondents rated themselves as feeling happier after knitting.)

But could crafts such as knitting offer more far-reaching, long-term health benefits?

Mind-stimulating activities such as these have been used by occupational therapists to alleviate symptoms of depression and to help improve motor functions in people with illnesses such as Parkinson's disease, says Sharon Gutman, an occupational therapist at Columbia University in New York.

In a 2007 review paper, Gutman and Victoria Schindler surveyed the scientific literature that analyzes the neurological basis for how hobbies and activities relate to health and well-being. They found that engaging in such activities as arts and crafts, music, meditation, home repairs and reading stimulates the mind, reduces the effects of stress-related diseases and slows cognitive decline.

But researchers are beginning to understand the neurological basis for why these activities are good for the mind.

In a [2012 study](#), Mayo Clinic professor of neurology and psychiatry Yonas Geda and colleagues studied the effects of activities including knitting, quilting and playing games in 1,321 seniors, nearly 200 of whom had mild cognitive impairment, an intermediate stage between normal aging and dementia. The researchers found that those who engaged in crafting, computer activities, playing games and reading books were 30 to 50 percent less likely to have mild cognitive impairment than those who did not.

Geda notes that activities such as crafting may help build up “cognitive reserves and the ability to buffer and withstand lots of assault by bad chemicals in the brain and bad proteins accumulating.” He points to [animal studies](#) showing that mice and rats living in enriched surroundings — such as with running wheels, toys and complex environments — are [less likely than others to develop cognitive problems such as dementia and Alzheimer’s disease](#).

One reason, Gutman says, is that these activities engage several of the brain’s lobes — the frontal lobe (which guides rewards processing, attention and planning), the parietal lobe (which handles sensory information and spatial navigation), the occipital lobe (which processes visual information), the temporal lobe (which is involved in storing memories and interpreting language and

meaning) and the cerebellum (which coordinates precision and timing of movement).

Calling on all of these brain regions stimulates neural connections and keeps the connections working quickly and efficiently, Gutman says. The more we use these connections as we age, “the more they seem to stay intact and preserve our brain’s function and stave off illnesses such as dementia.”

So far, only a handful of studies have explored the therapeutic potential of crafting activities. In one [study](#), 38 women hospitalized for anorexia were given a questionnaire about their psychological state after being taught to knit.

After an average of one hour and 20 minutes of knitting a day for an average of three weeks, 74 percent of them reported less fear and preoccupation with their eating disorder, the same percentage reported that knitting had a calming effect, and just over half said knitting gave them a sense of pride, satisfaction and accomplishment.

There is a great deal more anecdotal evidence of the beneficial health effects of knitting. For instance, the McLean-based nonprofit [Project Knitwell](#), which offers knitting instruction for caregivers, hospital staff, patients and patients’ relatives, has found that participants “are less worried and feel a great sense of accomplishment when they complete a knitted item,” says the group’s founder, Carol Caparosa. “We work with many new mothers whose babies are born prematurely and they may not be able to hold their babies for weeks after their birth, but they can knit them a hat, which brings them a tremendous sense of pride and feeling of mothering.”

The rhythmic movements of knitting offer many of the same kinds of benefits as meditation, says Carrie Barron, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University in New York and co-author of the book “[The Creativity Cure: How to Build Happiness With Your Own Two Hands](#).” In addition, she says, seeing a project take shape provides a deep sense of satisfaction. “When we have a life-affirming project going on that grabs the self and gets it to work in a positive way, that is an antidepressant,” Barron says.

I will keep all of this in mind the next time one of my knitting projects goes awry. It’s good to be reminded that it’s the process — not just the end product — that matters.

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