



World Health  
Organization

European Region

*Arts and health:*  
supporting the mental  
well-being of forcibly  
displaced people

*When you don't have anything to do, when there's no hope on the horizon, you lose your creative abilities. But with the theatre group, we became creative again. We stopped being so depressed, because we would think ahead to the next meeting, and talk about what we would create. The theatre gave us a few hours of freedom. It changed our mental health and our physical health.*

– Nouredin Musa

Asylum seeker from Darfur, Sudan<sup>1</sup>

## Key points

- ✿ Globally, an estimated 84 million people were forcibly displaced in 2021. In the first half of 2022, more than 11.9 million people have had to leave their homes because of the war in Ukraine alone.<sup>2</sup>
- ✿ Arts activities can play a role in psychological, behavioural and social processes that are linked with improved mental well-being, such as supporting the preservation of personal identity, heritage and experience.
- ✿ Engagement in arts activities can positively impact forcibly displaced people, as well as their host community, by promoting social inclusion, social cohesion, social acceptance and belonging.
- ✿ Artistic expression is an indicator of and a contributor to vibrant, resilient and healthy societies. Therefore, investment in the arts means investment in the well-being and social cohesion of both forcibly displaced people and their host communities.

<sup>1</sup> Faure G. How theatre helped African asylum seekers explain their plight to Israelis. The Observers. 14 May 2018 (<https://observers.france24.com/en/20180514-theatre-african-asylum-seekers-israel>, accessed 13 June 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Ukraine Emergency. UNHCR (<https://www.unhcr.org/ukraine-emergency.html>, accessed 13 June 2022).



# Introduction

The connection between art and mental well-being has long been recognized. Arts activities are complex or multimodal activities comprising multiple different components known to be health promoting, including social interaction, sensory activation, emotional expression, cognitive stimulation and physical activity.<sup>3</sup>

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that in 2021 global forced displacement likely exceeded 84 million, a sharp increase from the 82.4 million reported at the end of 2020. As a result of the war in Ukraine alone, so far more than 4.8 million people are believed to have fled the country.

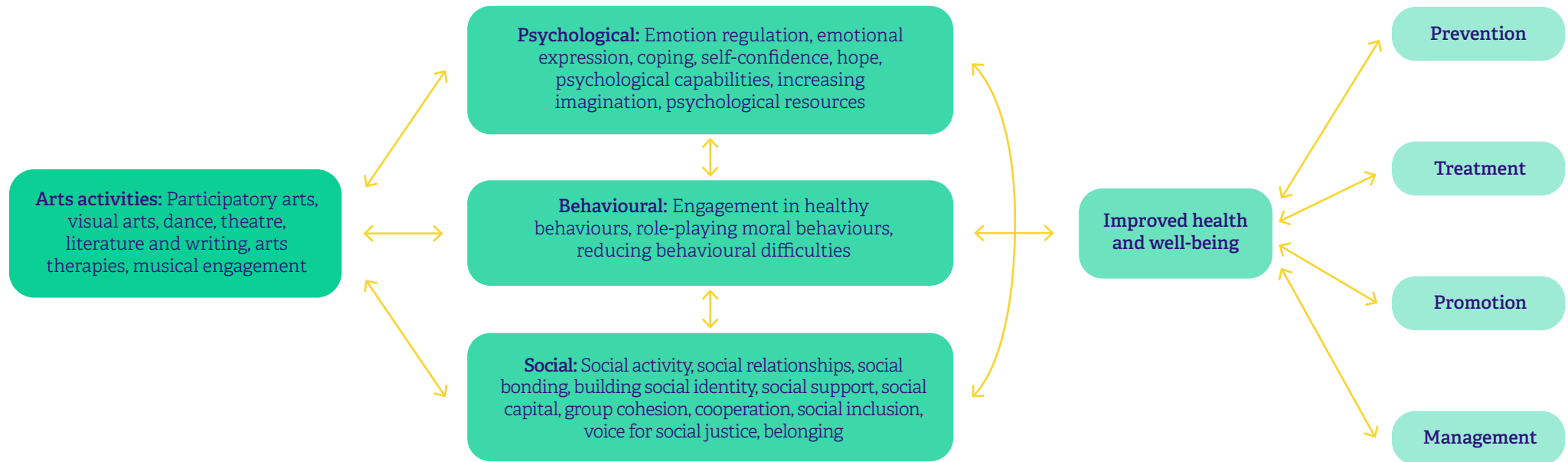


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of how the arts can help to improve health and well-being

Over 7.1 million more people remaining in the country are thought to be displaced from their homes.

People who have been displaced because of natural disasters, persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations have invariably experienced significant loss, physical hardships and other stressors that can result in psychological distress. A large body of evidence shows how forcibly displaced people contribute positively to society.<sup>4</sup> This potential can be further enhanced by ensuring that these people are in good physical and mental health.<sup>5</sup>

The IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings outline many important ways that governments and other relevant actors can support the mental health and well-being of forcibly displaced people.<sup>6</sup> Within this framework, arts activities can be one of the relevant activities to improve health and well-being by promoting multiple different psychological, behavioural and social processes (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> For example, arts activities can improve self-confidence, promote healthy behaviours as well as social inclusion and, importantly, offer hope.

<sup>3</sup> Fancourt D, Finn S. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67; <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329834>, accessed 13 June 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Verme P, Schuettler K. The impact of forced displacement on host communities: a review of the empirical literature in economics. *J Dev Econ.* 2021;150:102606 doi: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2020.102606.

<sup>5</sup> Mental health and forced displacement. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-and-forced-displacement>, accessed 13 June 2022).

<sup>6</sup> IASC guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings. Geneva: © Inter-Agency Standing Committee; 2007 (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-force-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/iasc-guidelines-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings-2007>, accessed 13 June 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Fancourt D, Aughterson H, Finn S, Walker E, Steptoe A. How leisure activities affect health: A review and multilevel theoretical framework of mechanisms of action using the lens of complex adaptive systems science. *Lancet Psychiatry.* 2021;8(4):329–39. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30384-9.

# Call to action

The following considerations are relevant to everyone involved in responding to humanitarian crises, including health workers, policy-makers, relief workers, cultural organizations, arts therapists and artists.

- ✿ **Investment in the arts means investment in improving social integration and cohesion, and can contribute to mental well-being for all.** Supporting arts, arts therapies and cultural activities can benefit the mental health and well-being of all people, whether they are forcibly displaced or members of host communities.
- ✿ **Arts and cultural activities can form an important part of an organized mental health and psychosocial support response.** Organizing arts and cultural activities for displaced people and their host community can help to support coping and promote recovery and integration. This could be achieved by, for instance, incorporating artist-led initiatives, arts therapies and arts interventions into the response.
- ✿ **Cultural and community assets can play an important role in supporting the health and well-being of forcibly displaced people.** People working in museums, libraries, performance venues, cultural centres, heritage sites and other cultural spaces, should consider how their venues can support forcibly displaced people, for example by showcasing their art, creating community theatre plays, organizing musical events and concerts, or developing relevant educational activities.
- ✿ **Artistic methods and practices can contribute to skill-building among those involved in humanitarian responses.** Integrating artistic methods into mental health awareness-raising and other types of training can help to improve active listening, cultural competence and diversity sensitivity. In humanitarian responders, these skills can greatly contribute to community empowerment and participation.

Anyone looking to engage with arts and health activities to support forcibly displaced persons should do so in collaboration and coordination with mental health and psychosocial support actors to ensure that the activities are based on locally assessed needs and adapted to the local culture. Basic psychosocial skills and the principle to “do no harm” should be integral components of capacity-building for artists working with refugees and the host population in an emergency setting.

# A summary of literature review findings

Research increasingly shows that both active and passive engagement with arts and cultural activities can support the mental well-being of people who have been

forcibly displaced. This table provides some published examples of how different arts activities can positively affect psychological, social and behavioural processes.

Activity type	Psychological	Social	Behavioural
Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves well-being, emotional expression and sense of agency (1–3)</li> <li>Reduces feelings of dissociation (1)</li> <li>Supports emotion regulation and productive coping strategies (4,5)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supports the rebuilding of a sense of normality (6)</li> <li>Improves social integration and interpersonal relationships (2,4,7–9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves personal skills and facilitates community action (2)</li> <li>Promotes leadership skills (7)</li> </ul>
Literature and writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increases confidence and ability in managing daily difficulties (10,11)</li> <li>Provides a sense of hope and improves well-being (12,13)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates spaces that facilitate creativity and communication (14)</li> <li>Gives voice to silenced groups in debates about social action and social justice (15,16)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develops empathy</li> <li>Builds communication and language</li> <li>Helps with health literacy skills</li> <li>Facilitates emotional expression (17)</li> </ul>
Theatre and dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aids emotional and creative expression (18–20)</li> <li>Supports recovery after traumatic experiences and reduces stress (21)</li> <li>Supports the emotional processing of grief (22–24)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates solidarity (25)</li> <li>Enables collaborative reflection (19)</li> <li>Builds respect for cultural differences (20)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves communication skills (19)</li> <li>Promotes the use of cooperative behaviours and strategies (19)</li> <li>Supports the development of compassion through role playing (26,27)</li> </ul>
Visual and participatory arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promotes imaginative engagement (28)</li> <li>Enables relaxation and encourages personal growth (29,30)</li> <li>Improves well-being and helps with processing experiences (31,32)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates friendships and a sense of belonging (33)</li> <li>Improves social cohesion by increasing social engagement and community well-being (29,34,35)</li> <li>Supports the establishment of a cultural identity (34,36)</li> <li>Facilitates mutual acceptance between displaced individuals and their host communities (34,36)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Builds communication and language skills (36)</li> <li>Reduces behavioural difficulties (37)</li> <li>Helps with developing practical skills that are useful in the labour market (38)</li> <li>Promotes skill-sharing (35)</li> </ul>

# Red Noses: the chance to be children

During a crisis, the use of clowning and providing a space for creativity can trigger a positive shift in focus for children by highlighting their strengths and abilities. For example, in a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece, clown doctors from Emergency Smile – the emergency response programme of Red Noses International – created a programme to support children and their families in developing strategies to cope with their challenging situation and express their feelings in a playful manner.<sup>8</sup> Silvia, a NGO coordinator in the camp, shared her experience with Emergency Smile:

I've never seen the kids laughing so much or being that happy and engaged...In a humanitarian context, it is easy to forget that all this is as important as providing for material needs and sometimes even more important... give these children the chance of being children, which is something that all of them need and deserve.

# Music Action International: music is the only way to take the pain out

Music Action International is an organization based in the United Kingdom that creates therapeutic music programmes with people living in exile, refugees, asylum seekers and Roma people.<sup>9</sup> Many of their facilitators have experienced the impacts of war and all are trained to support children, young people and adult survivors in encouraging the use of social and musical skills to improve mental health and well-being and in promoting empathy and understanding through public performance. As one of their participants, Frank, put it, “music is the only way to take the pain out”.

The Stone Flowers collective of torture survivors, a Music Action International initiative, has recorded two studio albums and performed live concerts that have had a powerful impact on the public. As one audience member remarked, “[Their music] is really important for thinking about war and peace and supporting survivors”.

<sup>8</sup> Emergency smile. Vienna: Red Noses International; 2022 (<https://emergencysmile.rednoses.eu/>, accessed 13 June 2022).

<sup>9</sup> “Hope is a powerful weapon” [website]. Manchester: Music Action International; 2022 (<https://www.musicaction.org/>, accessed 13 June 2022).



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<sup>9</sup> All references were accessed 13 June 2022.

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