

Arts Engagement in Trauma Recovery Shows Significant Mental Health Benefits

JHU's IAM Lab and Path with Art publish research showing arts engagement improves self-efficacy, adding to growing body of evidence supporting arts in public health for trauma recovery

Baltimore, MD, June 1, 2026—The Johns Hopkins University International Arts + Mind Lab (IAM LAB), Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics and Seattle-based Path with Art announce results of a new neuroarts study demonstrating that community-based arts participation can have a positive impact for people dealing with mental health challenges, particularly recovery from trauma.

In fact, **just over 90%** of study participants reported increased self-efficacy, or a belief in their ability to accomplish their goals despite difficulties, which is key to improved mental health.

Implications for trauma recovery

The peer-reviewed study, appearing in the journal [Health Promotion Practice](#), aligns with the growing body of neuroarts research that shows arts engagement strengthens social cohesion, belonging, and support and that community-based arts classes can be a valuable, accessible complement to traditional clinical care.

The study adds important data to the growing field of neuroarts, an interdisciplinary field that examines how arts and aesthetic experiences shape the brain, body, and behavior—and how this knowledge can be applied to improve health, wellbeing, and complex societal outcomes.

The study also has important implications for serving populations too often considered “hard to reach,” such as those experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse, substance use disorder, PTSD, and other mental health challenges.

Significant impacts on mental wellbeing

The study, using a validated pre- and post-program survey, found that Path with Art programs had measurable and positive impacts on participants' mental wellbeing, social connectedness, and self-efficacy. In addition to **just over 90%** of participants reporting that the programs increased self-efficacy,

- **Nearly 90%** of participants reported improvements in their mental health.
- **More than 80%** said they felt less lonely since taking the classes, and **69%** said they made new friends, suggesting improvements in social connection.

The IAM Lab team partnered with Path with Art, a non-profit with more than 18 years of experience in trauma-informed arts practice. Path with Art annually works with approximately 2,000 individuals in active recovery from trauma.

The study took place between February 2024 and March 2025 and involved 80 participants taking weekly classes over the course of two months in subjects such as dance, choir, writing, podcasting, visual arts, and more. In addition to actively being in trauma recovery, study

participants—all of whom were referred to Path with Art from health, housing, and human service organizations—had low or no income, or were veterans from any income level.

A powerful pathway where traditional systems fall short

“For underserved populations like those Path with Art serves, healing is often hard-fought and access to meaningful mental health support remains limited,” noted **Susan Magsamen**, Executive Director of the IAM Lab and a co-author on the paper. “This study shows that community-based arts engagement can create measurable improvements in wellbeing, connection, confidence, and hope—offering a powerful pathway toward recovery where traditional systems alone often fall short or are unavailable.”

In addition to the survey, the research team also employed a set of open-ended questions to better understand participants’ perceptions of the program’s impact. “Participants shared that engaging in classes increased their confidence, agency, and belief in their ability to navigate challenges,” noted **Keely Ragsdale**, lead author on the study and IAM Lab Senior Research and Education Associate. “For many, the classes were vital touch points during the week that offered structure, purpose and a sense of belonging,” said Ragsdale. “While we did see individual variation in responses, the overall positive results show exciting potential and support the need for research that further validates the impact of community-based arts engagement.”

“This study demonstrates what Path with Art has witnessed over nearly two decades: that arts participation is not simply enriching, it is restorative, life-changing, and deeply connected to recovery and human resilience,” said **Holly Jacobson**, Chief Executive Officer of Path with Art. “The study makes a strong, science-backed case for incorporating arts practice into healthcare practice and systems in the United States and adds to the recognition that arts engagement can be a powerful addition to public health infrastructure for trauma care.”

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Reference: Ragsdale K, Ng TWC, Tiedemann A, Manik C, Magsamen S. Path With Art: Exploring the Impact of Community Arts Programming on Trauma Recovery. *Health Promotion Practice*. 2026. doi:[10.1177/15248399261445966](https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399261445966)

About the International Arts + Mind Lab (IAM Lab)

The [International Arts + Mind Lab, Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics](#) (IAM Lab) is a multidisciplinary research-to-practice initiative at Johns Hopkins University that is accelerating the field of neuroarts through the study of neuroaesthetics. The IAM Lab is pioneering Impact Thinking, a translational research approach designed to solve intractable problems in health, wellbeing, and learning through the arts. The IAM Lab brings together brain scientists and practitioners in the visual and performing arts, architecture and design, and creative arts therapies to foster collaboration and research. The goal of the IAM Lab is to empower the global neuroaesthetics community to change the way we think today and enhance the way we live tomorrow.

About Path with Art

[Path with Art](#) is a Seattle-based arts engagement program shaping public policy and perception through practice, training and advocacy, and demonstrating that the arts are a driver of health and wellbeing. Since 2008, Path with Art has made engaging with the arts accessible to individuals and groups facing systemic challenges. As the program has grown, so has its vision—and its desire to shape the systems that create health. Path with Art now stands at the

forefront of a growing international movement that channels the power of art to bring dignity, awareness, and healing to the complex issues surrounding trauma recovery.

In addition to its work with the Seattle community, Path with Art now leads the Puget Sound Community Neuroarts Coalition in partnership with the IAM Lab and the Aspen Institute's NeuroArts Blueprint Initiative. The Coalition brings together regional partners across health, science, business, and the arts to explore how creative experiences can be used to improve community health and wellbeing.

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Images:

Path with Art [images](#) featuring community members engaging in arts programs