

Relationships between Art, Wellbeing and Neurodiversity

Clare Bell, MA Design Practice



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During my MA research so far, I have been drawn to the topics of wellbeing and neurodiversity, and the role that art and design can play in collaboration with these. I have returned to my arts education after 14 years of teaching, and my experiences have given me knowledge of the importance of my own mental health and how to help others understand their own. I will present an overview of my findings at this stage, beginning with my definitions of art, wellbeing, and neurodiversity.

Art can mean a wide range of things. I see it as any creative pursuit, whether it be a traditional art form such as painting, drawing or printmaking, or a wider concept to include design, performance art and writing. What is integral to art is the expression of self. I believe art is the study and exploration of yourself – it is about connecting the mind and the body, being completely present in the moment and learning deeper truths about yourself in the process.

Wellbeing relates to both your physical and mental health and is related to how others treat you, but mainly about how you treat yourself. Wellness however has become a loaded concept. It has been made into a commodity by what has become known as the ‘wellness industry’, and elitist in the sense that those who can afford the latest candle or crystal – or who can pay for the most luxurious spa retreat - are the ones who can achieve the best wellbeing.

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I love a bubble bath and a facial, but what has become apparent is that these things are mainly superficial and are mostly about pampering yourself. Instead of finding solace, it can actually become a burden – another thing women often blame themselves for not doing correctly. This is what Dr Pooja Lakshmin calls “the tyranny of self-care” (Lakshmin, 2023, p. 4). True self care is all at once easier, and more complex. It is about knowing yourself, what you need and allowing yourself to set boundaries. Dr Lakshmin states that real self-care is a verb (not a noun) and describes it as “an ongoing internal process that guides us toward profound emotional wellness and reimagines how we interact with others” (Lakshmin, 2023, p. 67).

Neurodiversity refers to the many different types of brain that a human can possess. The term was first used by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990’s to “capture the array of brain makeups found in the human species,” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 15). It recognises that people work differently. That everyone’s nervous system has its own strengths and struggles, and that we have different traits and ways of responding to sensory input ... and that that is okay. It moves us away from the two stark camps of those who are ‘neurotypical’ and those who are not. Instead, it recognises that there are all sorts of weird and wonderful ways that different brains work.

That’s not to say that the term Neurodivergence can’t be used also. This can be used to describe different types of brains. For example, those who have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), or autism would describe these as their Neurodivergence. As Jenera Nerenberg says, “*If*

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neurodiversity is the umbrella term—a fact of the human species—then neurodivergent is the term to be applied to individuals. If a person has been labelled or identifies as ADHD, autistic, bipolar, dyslexic, or another “diagnosis,” that person is said to be neurodivergent” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 15).

The most significant problem I believe we face is that we live in a society which was not built with the whole of humanity in mind. For that matter, it is also not built with our planet in mind, or the many creatures we share it with. Our systems, government and culture were generally designed by and for the white, heterosexual male. For too long, those who do not fit into that ideal have been pushed into the categories decided for them, oppressed by the very system they are trying to function within. The emphasis, even now, is usually on how that person can adapt to the world, how they can learn to cope and survive within it. As is the case with traditional and many modern therapies, the aim is to change ourselves – and it is usually accepted without question.

But why?

Why can't our society change and adapt to the many diversities of those living within it? If we can shift the emphasis of keeping people under control, and instead learn to see the world through the umwelts (the world as experienced by a particular organism) of others, then perhaps we can create space for us all to thrive.

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One current phenomenon is that we are seeing more and more highly successful women being diagnosed and treated for anxiety and depressions, and increasingly those women are going on to be diagnosed with autism or ADHD. Nerenberg states that “Study after study indicated high rates of depression and anxiety among “successful” women, but other traits, like ADHD and autism, were beginning to surface as well” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 2). So why are so many mental health problems and neurodivergences being recognised in later life in women who, to the rest of the world, appear to be not only succeeding in life but thriving? Unfortunately, the answer comes back to who our society was built by and for.

When I first started teaching in 2009, it was abundantly clear that the vast majority of children who were identified as having a special educational need were male. This was even more true in the group who often had an EHCP (Educational, Health and Care Plan) and were diagnosed with ADHD, autism or both. At the time, the disparity between genders was explained away by saying that what we now call neurodivergences affected boys more than girls. It was generally accepted that ADHD and autism were very rare in females.

At this point, it is useful to refer to where the specialist knowledge of healthcare professionals comes from in relation to neuroscience. Needing a controlled test group, and the fact that boys seemed to show neurodivergent traits more outwardly, the main body of research completed so far have been on male subjects – in fact, this is true in most scientific research. “Women have been absent from the growth of

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psychology as a field for the majority of its existence. That means that how we see the mind, talk about it, frame it, and ponder how to support it has been informed by thinking that originated in the minds of men, and by research that has largely been based on male subjects” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 40). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that current knowledge and practice around neurodivergences are centred around male symptoms and responses, and that the understanding of how female differences in neuro-make-up is not as well developed.

In a similar way that mental health difficulties and neurodiversity’s are often seen as something you either do or don’t have, Art is seen as something you can or can’t do. I believe this is absolutely not the case – it would be like saying you didn’t have the ability to try and understand yourself. I see art as anything that comes from your inner-self, and that each time we allow this to happen, we learn a bit more about who we are. It is true that some people are more in tune with this ability, or perhaps need it more strongly than others.

It is also true that people can learn artistic skills, which they then use to express themselves, and which the level of skill may often be praised. But just because you may not be as adept at those skills as others, it doesn’t mean that you are unable to create. There is such a self-conscious reluctance to engage with art, particularly among adults, and it is something I wish we could work on as a society. Especially from my own experience, where I know that art is such a fundamental part of my being. When I am engaged in something creative, it’s like my mind and body are completely in sync – my inner and outer worlds are connected. I believe

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this experience is the same as what is sometimes referred to as 'flow'. For me, the simplest way to achieve this state is through the humble pencil and paper.

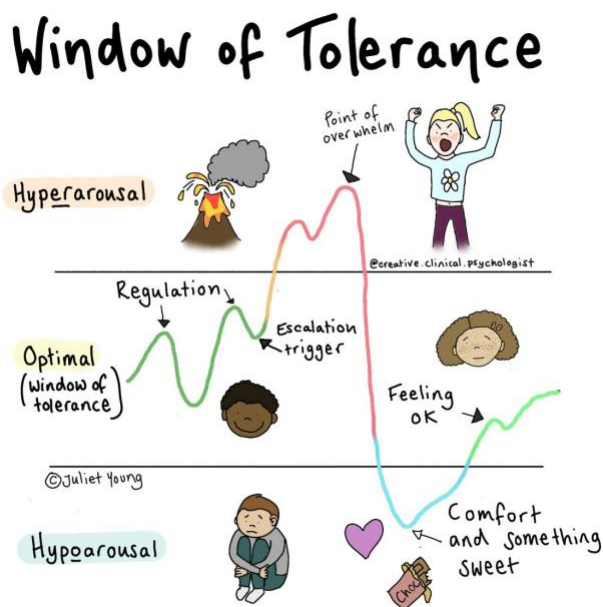
I'm a prolific doodler and have always recognised that it helps me to remain focussed and, in the moment, (rather than distracting me like some teachers may have believed). It is one of the first stages of my creative practice – I'm not aiming to imitate anything or make my sketch look like an object, person or place. Instead, I'm using a combination of line and mark making, often repetitively, but also with the freedom of simply seeing where the pencil takes me. Often, I look for patterns and shapes I'm drawn to by looking at my environment or a photograph as a starting point, but what is important is that it is all about the process. At that point, I'm not worrying about the outcome and how it might look – later I can analyse and edit them, deciding what I think could work and be aesthetically pleasing. But in the moments of making, I'm completely present, and it often feels as though I am working through my thoughts.

I can achieve this sense of grounding in other ways too: making a meal, writing, gardening, even deep breathing, as long as it is done with intention. However, my preference is always the primacy of a pencil (or pen) and paper, because it can be done almost anywhere and with very basic equipment. Obviously, deep breathing requires nothing but your own body, and I do find this useful at a time of overwhelm, but it is more of a quick fix – I doubt many people could continually concentrate on their breathing for more than a few minutes.

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Of course there is also meditation, but that does take a certain amount of effort and practice to achieve, and you also need a quiet space, which is often easier said than done. Clinical professor of psychiatry, Daniel J. Siegel first coined the Window of Tolerance as a term to describe a useful nervous system regulation concept. Annie Wright describes it as “a sense of groundedness, flexibility, openness curiosity, presence, an ability to be emotionally regulated, and a capacity to tolerate life’s stressors” (Wright, 2022).

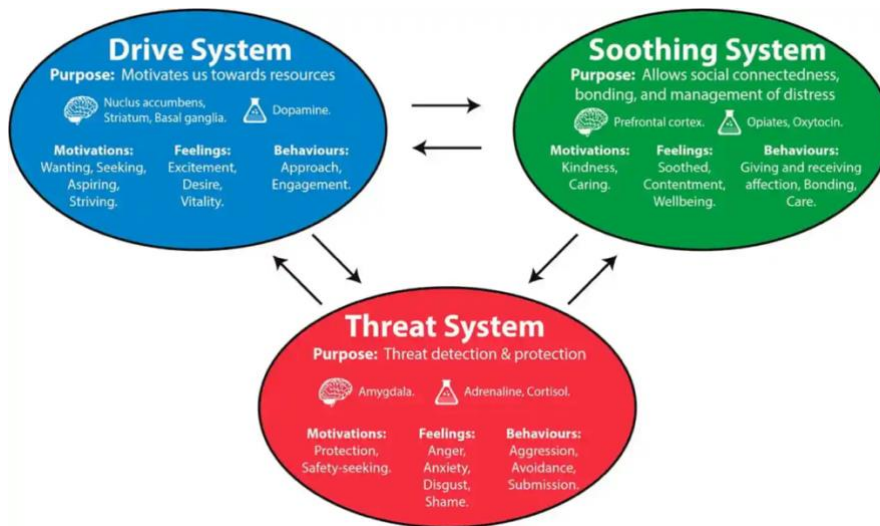


Window of Tolerance (X @EdPsychEd)

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Using this alongside Paul Gilbert's (Professor of Clinical Psychology) emotional regulation system, the three circles model, we can gain a clear understanding of the importance of true self care.



Paul Gilbert's Emotional Regulation Systems (Psychology, n.d.)

There are many grounding and soothing techniques out there, but I think what art can offer here is overlooked. If it is included, it is often reduced to simply colouring or following a set of instructions to create something – and there is still too much emphasis put on the outcome rather than the act.

Similarly, meaningful viewing of art is very often seen as something only certain people can do, and that others 'don't get it' – although much of what we consider as traditional art is much revered. Alain Du Botton explores this in his book *Art as Therapy*. He believes that *“to discover the purpose of art, we must ask what kind of things we need to do with our minds and emotions, but have trouble with,”* (Botton & Armstrong, 2013,

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p. 6), and that the seven key functions of art are: remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth and appreciation. The aspect that interests me most is that of art being a tool for self-understanding. He states that we *have “moods or states of the mind (or soul) that are perplexingly elusive. One has them often, but can’t isolate or examine them,”* and that *“Art builds up self-knowledge, and is an excellent way of communicating the resulting fruit to other people”*. This supports the theory that Art is the study of yourself and provides a significant connection between your outer and inner lives.

The main thing I have found links art, wellbeing and neurodiversity is sensitivity – which incidentally is the main way in which our outer and inner lives connect – it all comes down to sensory input. Although the research is still in early stages, it is indicating that frequently, creatives, those with mental health difficulties and neurodivergents have the trait of high sensitivity in common. The term highly sensitive person (HSP) was put forward by Elaine Aron, who states that “what seems ordinary to others, like loud music or crowds, can be highly stimulating and thus stressful for HSPs” (Aron, 1999). It is inevitable that HSP’s will face difficulties that many people would not experience at all, such as becoming overwhelmed when faced with bright lights, loud noises or strong smells.

Sensory overload will usually result in some form of meltdown, when the brain is trying to interpret and react to too many different inputs and just can’t keep up. The term meltdown is most often used in reference to autism. In her recent book, ‘Strong Female Character’, Fern Brady (diagnosed with Autism in later life) gives a frank and honest description

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of what it is like to have a meltdown. She says that “I’m very aware – painfully aware – of how insane it looks when I get locked inside my body ... I’m a tiny machine operator perched in the top of my head, and I have to surrender control, raising my hands in despair and watching helplessly while the machine rampages all around me” (Brady, 2023). This gives a clear sense of the brain going into overdrive and losing control, resulting in an out-of-body experience.

Equally, there are many positive things which HSP’s experience which the majority of people do not – or at least to a lesser extent. Nerenberg references to the work of her friend and mentor Elaine Aron, and states that HSP’s “tend to excel in psychology, writing, art, and music and as entrepreneurs. Because their nervous systems are more attuned to subtleties in the environment, they excel in perception, detecting nuances, and understanding others” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 37) This is even proven with brain imaging studies, which have shown that “HSPs process stimuli more elaborately and that some brain regions are more active in the integration of sensory information, awareness, and empathy” (Nerenberg, 2019, p. 37).

It is a common misconception that those with autism lack empathy, the truth is they are often overwhelmed by their abundance of empathy. Just as strategies to help children with autism (clear instructions, chunking tasks, routines and prior warning when they’d be a change) I was taught as a teacher were actually beneficial to all students, I believe that things which would help HSP’s thrive would also be helpful to everyone. I believe

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there needs to be a three-step approach to this: education, normalisation and integration.

When I speak of education, I don't only mean the general public being given information by experts – and this needs to go further than being only an awareness day or week. It also means this being part of the school curriculum and the experts themselves continuing research and finding out more – and most importantly giving the people who experience high sensitivity a platform to have their voice heard.

Initially, I was unsure about calling the next step 'normalisation', because the term normal can be very problematic when used alongside an opposite. However, I think rather than remove the term from our language, we instead need to widen our view of what normal is – because the fact is that diversity is in fact normal – there is no set way that should be seen as the standard by which everything else is judged. If we can challenge the definition of the term normal, then we might be on our way to correcting the problem of our society being designed by and for the white heterosexual male which I originally discussed. If there is a good level of education in society of what art, wellbeing and neurodiversity mean, then we can give people the language to identify with that, or at least understand it better. In doing so, we can break down misconceptions and stigma around these expressions of the inner self.

Finally, meaningful integration can then begin to happen. Art, wellbeing and neurodiversity are part of everyday life. People freely engage in helpful practices and actively consider the sensory input of different environments – in doing so, this not only allows HSP's to thrive in the

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world but makes it better for all – and has hopefully opened the door for other neuro divergences to be better understood.

Perhaps this seems like an unattainable ideal, but the work on these steps is already being done. More people are recognising their neurodiversity's, and therefore a wider sample of the community are there to learn from. Talking about mental health is becoming much more commonplace, and more people are engaging with art and creative practices. The act of designing our spaces to better suit HSP's is one which I am very much engaged with right now.

I have previously engaged with work that aims to make use of soothing colours, forms and patterns – much of which are derived from the principles of nature. I am currently working on pushing those ideas forward with different materials, techniques considering how we can make our urban spaces feel more natural in order to combat sensory overload. In doing so, it is impossible to ignore the current environmental problems we and our planet are dealing with.

Designer Nari Oxman is leading the way in growing new sustainable materials and working in collaboration with nature. Her company OXMAN “proposes the creation of design solutions by, for, and with Nature while advancing humanity. This holistic approach demands that we design across scales and kingdoms for systems-level impact” (Oxman, 2024). In a recent project (Aguahoja 2014-2020), Oxman used 3D-Printed biopolymers made from fallen leaves, apple skins and shrimp shells to

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create a sculptural structure, currently housed in the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. This amazing piece of design shows the possibilities of holistic Bio-Design.

The main conclusion I have reached at this point in my research is that sensitivity in design is of the utmost importance. This can be interpreted in several ways, and each have their own significance. Considering more carefully the sensory input of our spaces and environments could have huge benefits, particularly when paired with the purpose and audience of that space. We can also look at sensitivity through the lens of the designers and artists, and how the act of being creative can connect our inner and outer worlds. Finally, is sensitivity in how materials and processes are chosen, considering sustainability and environmental impact. By doing this, we can begin to educate, normalise and integrate high sensitivity, as well as widening the platform for other neurodiversity's.

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