



“Art is therapeutic and essential for our well-being,” says Jane Goh, Senior Assistant Director of Creative Services at the S Health, as she appreciates Choy Weng Yang’s 1977 painting, *Horizontals I*, in the National Gallery’s Art in 90 Seconds vide Singapore)

## Art for mental wellness

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*Paul Fisher*



One in four Singaporeans say they are not in good mental health, according to an Ipsos survey conducted in May 2020. The research, carried out in the first weeks of the circuit breaker measures, shows that the COVID-19 pandemic makes a positive approach to mental illness more important than ever.

Furthermore, a 2017 survey of young adults in Singapore found that nearly half of respondents associated mental illness with negative, derogatory terms like ‘crazy’, ‘weird’, and ‘stupid’ – and the



Next, a loud and proud celebration of World Mental Health Day is something to cheer.

Silver Ribbon (Singapore) is the driving force behind a series of October events that mark World Mental Health Day on 10 Oct, a date now recognised in more than 100 countries. What's more, Mdm Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore, is guest of honour at the third Asia Pacific Conference and Meeting on Mental Health, which will be held via Zoom on 7 and 8 Oct.

The Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) calls 10 Oct “a day dear to us as we seek to reflect back on the enormous value of mental health to each of us and our loved ones, and prevalent stigma against mental illness. On this day we encourage you to talk about mental health, to step up for assistance, or to help someone get the health they might need.” The core message from SAMH is, “Mental illness is a medical condition, not a choice.”

In response to a growing number of young people taking their own lives in Singapore, Silver Ribbon has developed a Youth Mental Health Resource Kit with the aim of promoting mental health, reducing suicide rates and building resilience.

Meanwhile, SAMH's Creative Services recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. Born out of a belief that embracing creativity in our everyday life leads to improved mental and physical well-being, SAMH Creative MINDSET Hub and SAMH Creative SAY! deliver programmes that tap into the power of visual arts, writing, music and dance as tools for prevention and intervention in mental health.

One professional working in the art therapy field is Josh Tan, who qualified with an MA (Distinction) Art Therapy and Cert HE Creative Expressive Therapies from the University of Derby in England. His experience includes serving in community mental health settings with the UK's National Health Service and providing individual art psychotherapy for children, teenagers and adults with a wide range of conditions including ASD, ADHD, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, OCD and psychosis.

The A List spoke to Josh about the healing power of art therapy.



**The very word ‘art’ can be daunting to many people. Do you feel it’s a shame that in our society we have a tendency to see art as something we do as children but only look at in a gallery later in life?**

Absolutely! I think we sometimes have a habit of putting art on a pedestal. Image-making is such an integral part of how children communicate and make sense of their world, and I think we lose a lot of that along the way. The ability to just ‘try’, without worrying about how it might look, is such a loss as we grow older.

In art therapy, however, the aesthetics are not the focus – it is not about creating ‘good’ or ‘bad’ art. Nor do you need to be ‘good’ at art to try art therapy. I always say that ‘stickmen’ or scribbles are completely allowed in my sessions! What is most important is that we are willing to try to use art-making to express ourselves. When we do, it becomes a powerful tool for communication and processing within therapy.

**When it is difficult to find the words to express how we are feeling, do you believe art can break down the barrier to communication in the sense that drawing or painting or sculpting a lump of clay tends to draw more directly on the emotions and the subconscious?**

Yes, I often say that art therapy provides a safe space to explore one’s emotions and experiences without having to find the ‘right’ words. I know first-hand that it can sometimes be hard to talk about things that we – or the people around us – are struggling with. Words can sometimes get in the way



It may sound whimsical, but there is plenty of neuroscience behind this. Our difficult experiences, especially traumatic memories, are stored in the non-verbal part of our brain, which does not really process words. Image-making within art therapy can be a powerful way of accessing these experiences safely, within our window of tolerance. Rest assured that an art therapist will NOT be interpreting or diagnosing your artworks.

### **What kinds of mental health issues can art therapy help with?**

Art therapy can be used to help with a wide range of difficulties, disabilities and diagnoses, including behavioural, emotional or mental health problems. That being said, it can be especially useful for people who find it difficult to talk about what they are thinking, feeling or experiencing, and may find it easier to work visually.

Just remember that you do not need to be considered 'unwell' by others to see an art therapist! Everyday people from all walks of life can benefit from journeying alongside a therapist. Each of us has our own unique set of struggles and it is important to recognise that we all heal in different ways.

### **Can art therapy benefit people of all ages?**

You can find art therapists working with children, adolescents, adults and the elderly in a large variety of settings such as schools, prisons, hospices and hospitals. Art therapy can be used with a whole range of ages and conditions, as long as the person is open to using art to express themselves. No previous experience or skill in art-making is required!

*Replies were edited and condensed for clarity.*

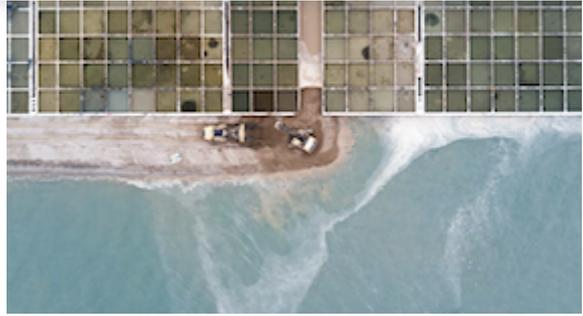
If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health issues, help is available from the organisations below:

- Silver Ribbon (Singapore) Youth Mental Health Resources Kit:  
<https://docs.google.com/.../1FAIpQLSdHRw5q.../viewform>
- SAMH helpline: 1800 283 7109
- Caregivers' Association for the Mentally Ill: 6389 2175
- Dementia Singapore helpline: 6377 0700
- Institute of Mental Health helpline: 6389 2222
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800 221 4444

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