

# Strength in Expression:

## A Guide to Using Creative Arts for Mental Wellness



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This guide can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/strength-in-expression.asp>.  
For a hardcopy of the guide, please contact [VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov](mailto:VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov).

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## Creative Arts for Veterans

This guide is for Veterans who want easy and quick ways to use the creative arts for their well-being. The activities in this guide can help you relax, take a break from heavy emotions, and connect with yourself in a way that feels comfortable. Most importantly, you don't need to be an artist or have special supplies to make the most of the creative arts!

The visual arts can be powerful in improving mental wellness and managing emotions. Art making can encourage expression when words aren't enough. You might use drawing in your life without realizing that these activities are great for mental wellness, too. Making visual art can be a type of self-care that allow you to reflect, feel an emotion boost, and improve relationships.

As with the visual arts, music does not need experience or special talents. You can combine art and music together and do both privately or with friends and family members. Creative activities can feel empowering and help boost your mental health.

## Understanding How Visual Arts Can Help

There are many ways you can care for your mental wellness—one of them being art.

The creative arts include many different practices. They are “imaginative experiences” for both the artist and the audience. The creative arts include performing arts like music and theatre, visual arts like crafts, literature like poetry, and more. Across cultures, artistic activities help people reflect on experiences, be creative, and build emotional ties. Artistic activity is not about talent or how it looks or sounds but about participation and experience.

Visual arts provide a chance to express feelings that might be hard to put into words. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to use art, which means it can be useful for everyone. Scientists have shown that creative expression can help with handling emotions, processing trauma, and reducing stress. Creative expression can connect you to the present moment and bring joy. Visual arts include drawing, painting, journaling, photography, and more. Any way you make art, it can encourage self-reflection, emotional wellness, and enjoyment.

Creating art activates areas in the brain related to reward and emotional memory. This means art can help you uncover emotions that have been held inside. It lets you learn more about yourself and can encourage your desire to continue making art in the future. It helps you tell your story, gain a sense of stability, and move toward better mental health.

Art can positively affect your body. Scientific studies show that making art can help your body relax and your mind refocus by lowering cortisol, a stress hormone. The process itself can be very calming, and you don’t have to be an artist to get benefits.

Visual arts wellness activities can be a form of self-care. They can develop your ability to guide your mental wellness and increase self-esteem and your understanding of your state of mind. Art can be a private, personal activity. It can be done at home, with small supportive groups, or in remote locations, such as on a mountain or at the beach. Veterans in rural locations can benefit, too. Visual arts wellness activities can be especially helpful to do along with mental health treatment. It is important to note that creative arts do not replace mental health treatment.

## What This Guide Offers

This educational guide is made to help Veterans begin their journey with art activities.

Inside, you’ll find:

- Simple activities that you can do at home using everyday materials.
- Step-by-step instructions.
- Tips to help you reflect on your emotions after artmaking.
- Ideas for group participation, so you can use them alone or with others.

The activities in this guide are flexible. They focus on creativity, healing, and self-expression, instead of artistic skill. Art for wellness is for everyone. Whether you are drawing, journaling, or molding clay, the most important thing is the process.



## Getting Started: Setting Up Your Space

Before beginning your arts journey, it's helpful to create a space that feels calm, safe, and welcoming. You don't need an art studio or fancy supplies, just a place that allows you to relax and be yourself. This could be somewhere in your home, at a cafe you enjoy, or the outdoors. Having a regular spot where you create your art can make it easier to set up a routine and get in the right mindset. Once you've got the "where" figured out, you can focus on your wellness and being creative. When your surroundings feel comfortable, it is easier to let the creativity flow, focus on your emotions, and express yourself without judgment.

Choose a location where you can sit comfortably, with few distractions. It should feel peaceful and easy to return to whenever you want to make art. Try to find some good lighting, like natural light from a window. If you enjoy being outside, such as sitting on a porch, that also works. Nature is often calming. An open space will make it easier for you to spread out your materials when you begin.

If noise is an issue, try using earplugs, headphones, or playing soft background music.

Make the space personal and comforting. You might light a candle, play music in the background, or have a few meaningful items.

Keep in mind that your creative space doesn't need to look a certain way or have anything specific. What matters most is that it feels like a place where you can think, feel, and create.

Before you begin, you will need a few basic supplies. You don't need much to start, and it isn't necessary to buy expensive materials. You can use simple materials that are inexpensive or already around your home.

Many things are found around a home:

- Paper or a notebook
- Pens, pencils, or markers
- Colored pencils or crayons
- Scissors and glue
- Magazines or newspapers for collages

It might be helpful to store your materials in a small box or bag so they're easy to reach each time. It also makes it easier to move your supplies around, if you want to make your art in a different setting.

### General Instructions and Duration for Activities

- Consider using a timer so you don't need to watch the clock. You can also simply be there with your art for as long as you want.
- Start the activity by taking one deep breath or with a simple statement, such as "I'm here to express, not to judge."



## Tips On How to Get Started

### Addressing Hesitations and Misconceptions

Many Veterans feel unsure about using art as an activity. It's common to think, "I'm not good at art," or "I won't know what to do." Others might worry about strong emotions coming up when they start to create.

Art isn't about skill. It's about expression. The goal is to help improve your mental state, like feeling more positive and having greater motivation, not to make a perfect picture or master every art technique. Simple doodles, lines, or colored shapes can help you with thoughts and emotions that words can't express. It has been scientifically shown that people without previous art-making experience can have the same benefits of stress relief as people with experience.

You can take breaks, work slowly, or do a different activity at any time. Sometimes you might want to draw something detailed. Other days, you might want to quickly scribble, paint broad colors, or mold clay shapes with your hands. All of it is art!

If you feel overwhelmed while creating, pause for a few deep breaths or take a break. You can return when you're ready. Remember that feeling emotions during art making is a normal part of self-care. It means your mind and body are processing things that may have been held within.

# Encouragement for Getting Started

Starting something new can be intimidating. Just like physical training, the more you practice, the more confident and comfortable you'll become. Your art-making journey is about progress, not perfection.

Here are a few ways to begin:

- Set some time aside, for example, 45 minutes every few days. Just 45 minutes of art making was found in past scientific studies to reduce stress levels in many participants.
- Try different materials until you find what feels best to work with.
- Keep your finished art. Looking back later can show how you've grown in your self-care.

If it helps, you can think of this as a **SMART goal**. SMART goals are a helpful way to clearly set goals and plan how to achieve them. SMART is an acronym for **Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely**. The table below can help you form your goals with art into a SMART goal.

First, think about what goal you want to achieve by making art. It can be a big or small goal, long term or short term, whatever you want. Then, you can fill out more details for your plan using the SMART acronym.

**Specific:** What do you want to achieve? When do you want to achieve your goal? What materials do you want to use, or what ideas do you want to explore? Add as many details as you can.

**Measurable:** How will you measure your progress? How will you determine your progress with your current art project?

**Attainable:** Challenge yourself! How much time or effort will you put towards your art project? How can you help yourself to achieve your goal?

**Realistic:** Make sure your goal is something you can see yourself doing. You want to stay motivated and excited about creating art, so make sure you can see yourself working towards your goal.

**Timely:** Is there a deadline you're giving yourself? How much time do you think it will take for you to achieve your goal?

These prompts can help you to create an exciting, realistic goal for yourself. They can give you a better understanding of where you are on your journey and will guide you towards improving your mental wellness through art.



### Example SMART goal:

#### **S (Specific):**

I want to create a small watercolor painting of a place that makes me feel calm.

#### **M (Measurable):**

I will complete one part of the painting each week (like sketching, painting background, or adding details).  
I will write a reflection on how I felt before and after making art.

#### **A (Attainable):**

I will work on my painting for 20–30 minutes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings this week. I will keep my art materials at my kitchen table so it's simple to start when I have time.

#### **R (Realistic):**

This goal is meaningful to me because painting a calming place can help me slow down, relax, and focus on something creative.

#### **T (Timely):**

I plan to complete this painting in one week.

### Keep In Mind

- You never have to show your art to anyone, unless you want to.
- It's normal for emotions to come up, and you can step away from your art at any time if it helps you to manage your emotions.
- You cannot “mess up.” Any mark on a page is part of your art.



# At-Home Arts Activities To Try:

## Drawing and Coloring to Explore Your Emotions

**Recommended time:** 30–60 minutes

**What it helps:** Processing emotions and memories, relieving emotional distress, and learning about new aspects of yourself. This has been commonly described as relaxing and enjoyable.

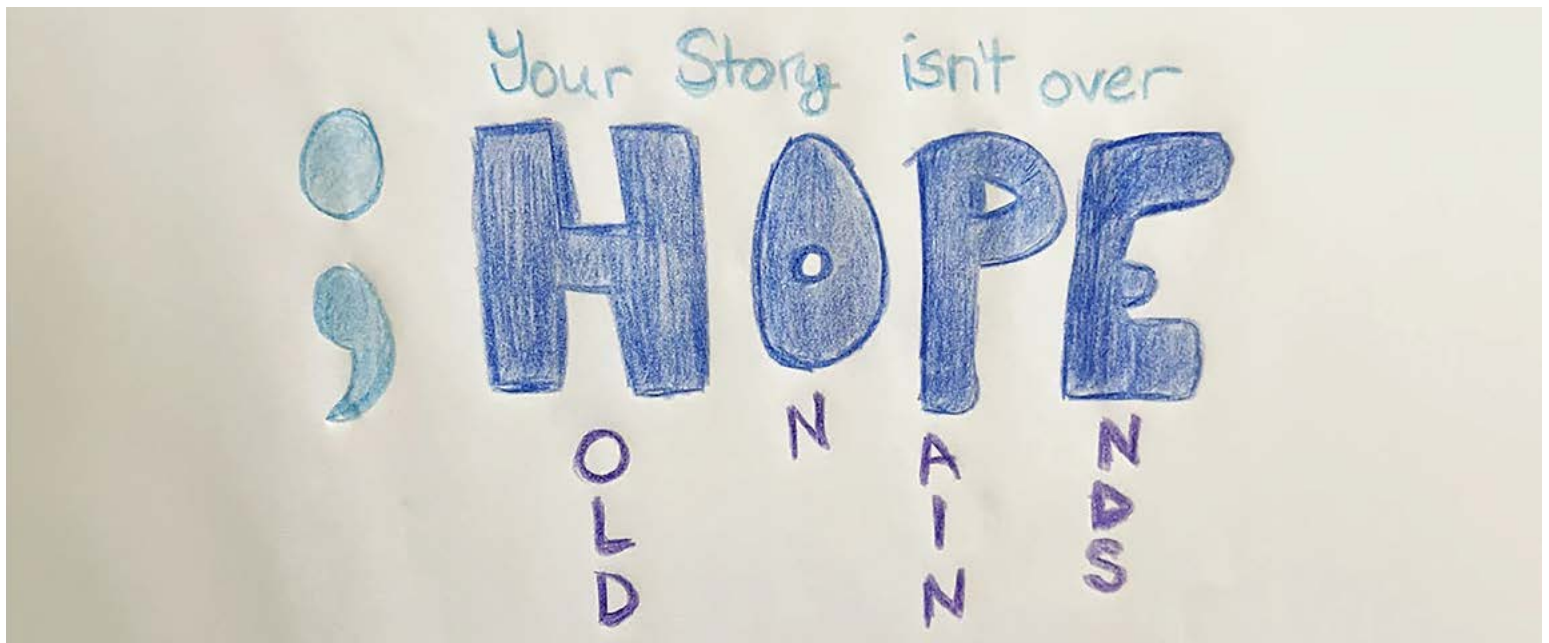
Drawing can help you better understand your thoughts and feelings. It can turn confusing emotions into something you can see and think about. This can offer you a deeper understanding of complex experiences.

### Materials:

- Pencils, pens, or crayons
- Paper (any kind)

### How-to:

1. Find your comfortable space with a flat surface to draw on.
2. Spend 30–45 minutes drawing whatever comes to mind. It could be a memory, a feeling, or just shapes and colors.
3. Try using colors to show emotions (for example, red for anger, blue for calm).
4. When you're done, look at your drawing and think about what it means to you. You can write a few words or short notes about what you think about during the activity.



**Veteran Art Jillian Rigert**, Air Force Veteran



# Collage for Meaning Making and Storytelling

**Recommended time:** 15–60 minutes

**What it helps:** Telling your story through visual pieces allows you to freely express yourself. This is an easy way to get into art-making and can relieve hesitations you may have while encouraging your creativity.

A collage involves cutting and placing pictures on a flat surface to create a picture. This can help you express ideas without needing to draw anything. Collages let you tell your story through personal interpretations when words are hard to find.

## Materials:

- Magazines, newspapers, printed photos, colored paper, stickers, fabrics, and anything else you want to put on the page
- Optional: pencils, pens, or crayons, if you'd like to note anything down
- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- A blank sheet of paper, notebook page, or cardboard

## How-to:

1. Cut out pictures or words that catch your eye, make you feel something, or that you simply like.
2. Place and glue them onto your page however you like.
3. Spend about 15–45 minutes creating your collage.
4. When you're done, think about answering these questions:
  - “Why did I choose these pictures?”
  - “What story does this collage tell about me?”
  - “How does making this collage make me feel right now?”

# Expressive Visual Journaling

**Recommended time:** 30–45 minutes

**What it helps:** Understanding your emotions, like identifying positive and negative feelings, and building your confidence. It can help improve your self-concept and build your identity as an artist. Adding daily things that you are grateful for, big or small, can increase your well-being and lower stress.

A visual journal means combining pictures, words, and colors to reflect on any part of your life. It can help you understand your emotions and notice changes in your mood throughout your daily life. Many people find that this helps them build confidence through creative means.

## Materials:

- A notebook or sketchbook
- Pens, markers, pencils, or paints
- Optional: photos, stickers, or printed words

## How-to:

1. Set aside about 30–45 minutes each day or a few times a week.
2. On each page, write or draw anything you want from your day. This could be a moment that stood out to you, a thought, or something you're grateful for. What you're grateful for can be small things too, like a hot cup of coffee in the morning.
3. Add color, sketches, or cutouts to show your mood.





## Creating Art on a Mobile Device

You might prefer making art on a mobile device, like a phone or tablet. Many people enjoy creating art digitally. You do not need special software or supplies, and most devices already have a drawing or note-taking app built in. You may find that you prefer this kind of art over other techniques because it doesn't require as many supplies and is a flexible option.

You can create shapes, lines, or simple images the same way you would on paper. Digital art lets you draw, write, or add color; so you can explore different ideas like how you would with physical supplies.

## Clay or Sculptural Expression

**Recommended time:** 30–60 minutes

**What it helps:** Giving a sense of control and processing inner emotions. You may have improvements in your self-esteem and emotional well-being as well, as this becomes an interest in your life.

Working with clay or other hands-on materials is an option for creative arts expression. Creating art pieces by touching and shaping things gives you a sense of control, and can help with recognizing internal conflict.

### Materials:

- Air-dry clay or playdough
- Optional: simple tools like a butter knife, spoon, or rolling pin for shaping
- A clean surface or table

### How-to:

1. Sit comfortably at a table or outdoor space.
2. Spend about 30–45 minutes shaping the clay into whatever feels right to you. This can be a shape, object, or abstract form. It doesn't have to be something in real life.
3. Focus on the feeling of the material in your hands. For example, you can observe the texture, weight, and movement.
4. When you finish, you can let the clay air dry or simply reshape it next time.

# Photography

**What it helps:** Lowering stress levels and promoting a feeling of empowerment. This is an easy way to creatively express yourself, reflect on your mental state, and give you a sense of achievement and enjoyment.

You might find that taking pictures and looking at them helps you notice things like light, textures, or objects. Photography can support well-being, especially because it can help with creative expression and give you a sense of enjoyment. A phone camera works well.

You can try:

- Taking photos while on a walk indoors or outdoors.
- Notice anything that might catch your eye, like a color, texture, or object.
- Take a couple of photos of anything you want to capture.
- When you're done, you can look at your photos and think about questions such as:
  - “What was I trying to capture?”
  - “What feeling do I have while looking at this picture?”



**Veteran Art** Innocenzo “Vinnie” Riviello, Army Veteran



**Veteran Art** Innocenzo “Vinnie” Riviello, Army Veteran

## Art Viewing

**What it helps:** Lowering stress levels and increasing connection.

The techniques above are hands-on activities and ideas you can try. But not all art activities have to involve creating something. Just looking at art can work well, too. Whether it is a painting, a photo, or something else, it can help reduce stress and improve your mood.

Science shows that looking at artwork can lower stress levels, which can give your mind relief from mental pressures. This can also help with self-reflection. Certain colors or settings might bring a sense of calm or comfort or help you explore emotions. You can do this by looking at artwork online, visiting an art gallery, or looking at photos in a book or magazine. This can help you feel connected to others. Viewing art can also stimulate curiosity.

When viewing art you can ask yourself:

- “What might the artist have been experiencing at this time?”
- “What story are they telling?”
- “What feeling do I have while looking at this art?”

# Other Art Forms

The activities in this guide are a great place to start. There are many other forms of art that you may enjoy.

Some examples include:

- Woodworking
- Cake/cookie decorating
- Metal sculpting
- Sand sculpting
- Ice sculpting
- Sewing
- Glass blowing
- Jewelry making



**Veteran Art Robin Gonzalez**, Marine Veteran



## Sharing Art With Your Community

### Peer-Based Reflection and Support

Sharing meaningful art activities with others who have had similar experiences can be powerful. Group art activities can help you inspire hope and stimulate self-expression in a community-based setting. In group art settings you can talk about ideas like resilience, gratitude, or memories of your service. Or you can simply create art around those themes.

Contact VHA Whole Health to check if your VHA has an art group. Or, look for groups in your community, or even start your own.

### Sharing With Family and Supportive Community

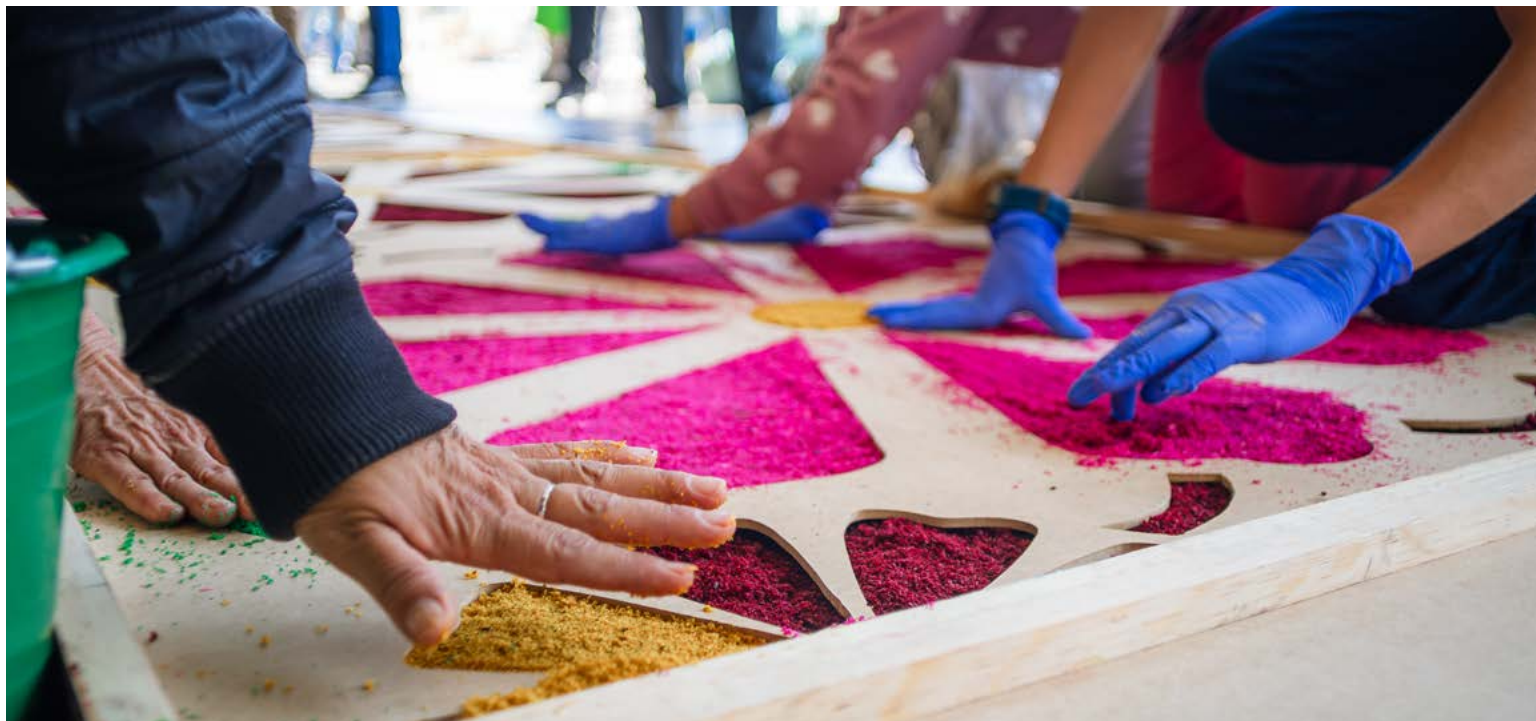
Some Veterans may want to share their artworks with trusted family members, friends, or local groups. This is optional.

#### **Benefits of Sharing:**

- Helps others understand your experiences through art instead of verbal explanations.
- Builds sense of community and freeness.
- Allows Veterans to also give and receive social support.



Sharing should always be on your terms, and only if you feel ready. Remember that each person's reaction can be different.



## More Ideas for Your Arts Journey

### Integration with Faith and Spirituality

You can also explore your spirituality with art. Faith and spirituality contribute to your mental well-being. For some Veterans, this might help with questions about faith, guilt, or purpose after service.

Answering questions such as “What does peace look like to me?” or “How do I visualize forgiveness?” can encourage creativity and spirituality.

#### Feeling Stuck

If you’d like some inspiration, try looking at the art examples throughout this guide. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to create, and your work does not need to look like any example you see here. These images are meant only to spark ideas. What you make can be completely different, simple, abstract, or messy.



### Integrating Telehealth and Peer Support

If it’s hard to get in-person care, telehealth can make art-based wellness activities accessible from home. In fact, scientific studies show that many Veterans handle their feelings very well because they’re in their familiar, home environment.

# Continuing Your Creative Journey and Monitoring Your Well-being

The purpose of this guide is to introduce you to the visual arts to support your well-being. From here, you have the freedom to explore art in any way that feels right for you. You can continue with the activities in this guide, try new forms of creative expression, or build your own routines over time. It can be a hobby, a form of self-care, or even something like a career, growing with you over time.

Art is always available to you. Whether you use it during difficult moments, as part of your daily routine, or simply when you feel inspired, you return to it throughout your life.

As you move forward, allow yourself to stay curious, open, and patient. Try it out for yourself, and continue finding strength in your expression through your own art making.

## Signs you may need more help

Pay attention to how you feel before, during, and after creating art.

If art making brings up emotions that feel too painful or overwhelming for you to face on your own, you should talk to a clinician. They can help you process your emotions safely.

If you're in a crisis, reach out to the **Veterans Crisis Line**.

**Phone:** Dial 988, then press 1

**Text:** 838255

**Online Chat:** [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)





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