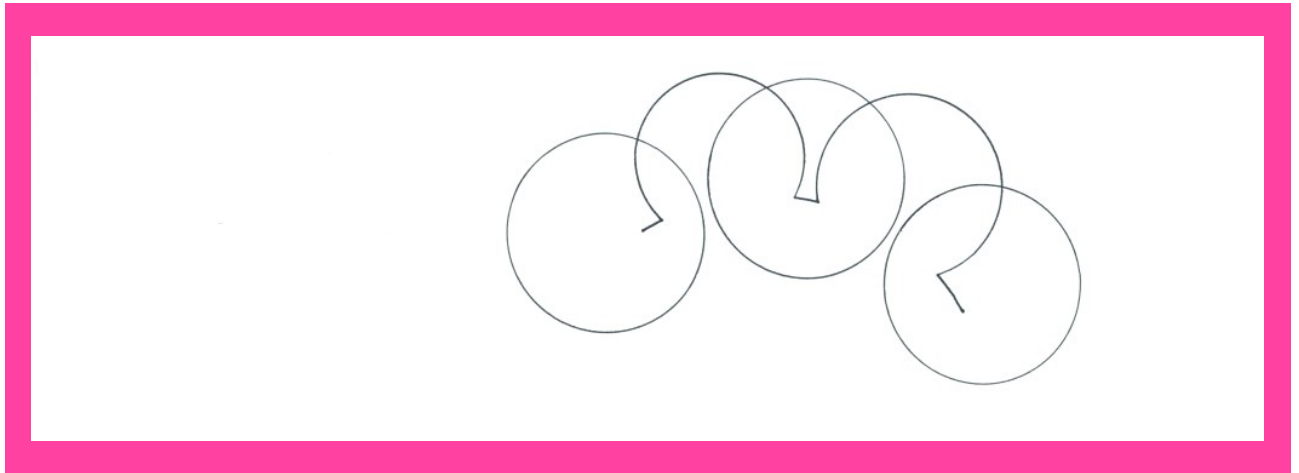


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Caring for the carers

Providing opportunities for creativity shouldn't be at the expense of the person delivering them. It's time to pay attention to the needs of creative practitioners, says Nicola Naismith

There can be no doubt that engaging with arts and creativity is good for our physical health and mental wellbeing. Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, the report prepared by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Arts, and What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health?, the recently published scoping review by Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, provide a credible and robust evidence base. So if we support the World Health Organisation edict that health is a fundamental human right for everyone, then we must pay attention to the wellbeing of those who work to promote and protect health in its widest sense.

The use of arts for health and wellbeing is becoming more prevalent. It is increasingly a source of income for creative practitioners who develop, adapt and apply their creative skills in a range of contexts including hospitals, care-homes and community settings. The work can be enjoyable, engaging and fulfilling, but it can also be challenging, difficult and at times overwhelming. So we must ask ourselves what support creative practitioners need in order to stay well, both for their own health and wellbeing and in order to promote conditions for the best quality experience for and with participants. If the arts are positive for participants, so too should they be for the artist providers. Providing opportunities for creativity shouldn't be at the expense of the person delivering them.

Challenges

The temporary or project-based contracts frequently used in the arts result in many creative practitioners living with fluctuating incomes and precarious working conditions. Working in health and wellbeing settings can add a further layer of challenge, which if unsupported can place the practitioner workforce at risk of burn-out or ill-health. Difficulties that arise from working in participatory arts are not to be taken as a sign of personal weakness, but rather an indication that existing systems of support may be poorly resourced, inconsistent or non-existent. Reflecting on these challenges during my Clore Fellowship prompted me to propose the Artists Practising Well research project to explore this topic in more depth.

Published earlier this year, and supported by AHRC and Clore Leadership, Artists Practising Well explores the affective support experiences of creative practitioners working in health and wellbeing. Data was collected through an online survey and perspectives gathered through a series of interviews with cultural leaders, all contextualised with desk-based research. The resulting picture of support for practitioners is mixed: some receive good support while others aren't getting enough or any.

The report makes recommendations under headings which each offer thoughts for discussion and implementation. Fair pay for creative practitioners has a big part to play, together with a culture shift towards valuing and caring for practitioners. As one interviewee put it "I would be able to look after myself a lot better if it wasn't so hard to earn a living wage".

Effective action

Research is only as useful as the conversations and actions it supports. Providing appropriate affective support is best undertaken as a joint endeavour between practitioner, organisation/commissioner and funder. An honest appraisal of the current situation is a good place to start as it enables a clear picture to be formed. Creative practitioners can ask themselves what they need in order to do their best work and what they are doing to support themselves already. Organisations may ask themselves what they are offering, in what form and how often: what information are they are using to inform the initiatives being developed? Funders could consider how to allocate resources to support practitioners, and make clear that support costs are something they expect to see in applications. How can trustees hold their senior leaders to account by monitoring how creative practitioners are cared for within the organisations they govern?

Programmes of support need to be responsive to the context and duration of the work and – importantly – the needs of the practitioners themselves. Much like working with participants, one type of support will not be useful to all and there needs to be an allocation of resources and a commitment to change in the ways affective support is offered and facilitated.

A growing conversation

There is evidence of resources being committed to this issue, both by the commissioners of the work and the organisations who support the creative workforce. Residential retreats, mentoring, and organisational and artist-led initiatives each provide much needed opportunities to reflect, share and learn, which contributes to the health and wellbeing of practitioners and supporting best practice for participants. This year the Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance National Conference will focus on care: for one another (participants, practitioners, commissioners), for the environment, and for caring economies. There will be awards connected to these themes with the Practising Well Award inviting artists or museum/heritage practitioners to nominate commissioners, employers, peers or organisations who are supporting practitioners and creating conditions that nurture better wellbeing and enable everyone to practise well. The award will highlight and celebrate support practices which are “championing, delivering and embedding practitioner care into project design, commissioning and management”.

The conversation is growing and now is the time for support for creative practitioners to be embedded across arts for health and wellbeing work, and I would argue all participatory arts. Please contribute your own perspectives and ideas so the conversation can grow. By working together we can promote the idea that good support leads to good practice, which ultimately benefits everyone.