

**The Mind's Release:**  
**An Artistic Exploration of Mental Health**

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## **The Mind's Release: An Artistic Exploration of Mental Health**

When considering what I wanted to do for my Honors Capstone, I thought a lot about both the creative and psychological elements I wanted to include. I have always been fascinated with the relationship between art and mental illness as many well renowned artists have struggled with inner demons. Art is both an exploration and release of inner turmoil that can often be difficult to put into words. Being able to release emotion in such a way puts artists in a unique position where they have a visual representation of their experiences and feelings that has the potential to be seen by friends, family, and even strangers. *The Mind's Release: An Artistic Exploration of Mental Health* is a virtual exhibition of artwork submitted by artists across the country.

In my research, I found that the relationship between the arts and mental health is undeniable. For centuries, artists have used art as a tool to both process and portray their inner turmoil. Some of the most celebrated artists in history have major themes of struggling with their own minds throughout their portfolios. Many of these artists and, subsequently their artworks, continue to be loved and celebrated today. People feel a deep connection to the portrayals of pain, struggle, and loneliness that are present in these works. Art serves as a bridge between language and understanding, helping to foster empathy between artist and viewer.

Liz Logan states that "[a]rtists can increase empathy in others through their work, eliciting that feeling from people who may be numb from all the terrible things going on in the world, making the viewer more sensitive and vulnerable." In sharing their art, artists invite us to share intimate emotions with them - giving the viewer a chance to understand others' experiences with mental health issues more fully. Ziff et al. (2017) found that viewing art fosters strong emotional reactions and feelings of empathy. When artists choose to share their art with

others, especially when paired with a statement, they are opening the door to a world that is often misunderstood.

Not only does creating and sharing artwork help audiences, it has also been shown to help artists themselves. Creating art allows individuals to process and understand their own struggles with mental health issues (Biro-Hannah, 2021). Artistic expression provides a unique release of emotion, both for the artist as well as the viewer. Bone found that artists experienced “positive personal, emotional, physical, and/or mental health changes” when creating artwork and sharing it with others (2018). Creating artwork allows artists to release and process their experiences and emotions while sharing it can give them a sense of understanding and community.

When first planning this project, I had hoped to have both a virtual and in-person component to be able to bring a larger platform to mental health issues. Artwork was not limited to painting or sketches; submissions could have been anything from photography to an original song to a short film. In early January, a call to artists was sent by a flyer that was shared digitally through social media and email.



Figure 1: Flyer

An in-person event would have been a great opportunity to be able to give many of the artists who had submitted a chance to present their works as well as an opportunity for the community I’ve been a part of for the last four years a chance to come together to learn more

about art and mental health. Unfortunately, by the time we would have needed to start preparing for such an event, I had only received one submission to the exhibition. In order to include more artwork and make the exhibition more accessible, I decided to scrap the in-person component and fully focus on the digital exhibition – wanting to have an accessible, online experience that had the ability to adapt as I got more submissions.

To my excitement, I did get many more submissions – a total of ten individuals submitted artwork to be a part of this exhibit, many submitting multiple pieces. Many of the artists were students at the University of Wyoming. However, there were also individuals from Utah, Ohio, and Missouri who submitted works as well. When going through the artwork and statements, I wanted to create a collaborative, digital space where these words and works could be displayed. I decided to omit my own name from the website to give full focus on the artists, their work, and what they were representing. The statements that I got from the artists about their works were vulnerable and inspiring. One of the artists, Tiffany Whitby, provided the following statement to accompany her works:

These art pieces are a collection of pages from my sketchbook from the beginning of the pandemic- I lost my job, I left my church, and I practiced my newfound independence haphazardly. I desperately struggled with my mental health for a while. These pieces were the first attempts at art after I decided doing art for deadlines wasn't for me. The things that struck most urgently to me at that time were my months-long dissociation, my bulimia, and my religious trauma.

The impact COVID-19 had on individuals' mental health as well as their art and artistic process was a common theme that I observed while looking through the works. Many of the artists

expressed similar sentiments within their artwork – the drastic changes people had experienced as well as the increased isolation significantly impacted mental health.

The artwork and statements that I received from the artists were vulnerable – beautifully portraying their inner worlds. Each of the pieces were drastically different but each was strong. The specific aspects of mental health that were represented was as equally diverse as the approach the artists had in expressing themselves. When analyzing the artists’ words and art, I was able to organize their works into three categories which I eventually titled: “Portraying Mental Health Disorders,” “Visualizing Impacts on Mental Health,” and “Picturing Healing.” The first category, “Portraying Mental Health Disorders,” includes pieces that directly address mental health disorders that the artists experience (i.e., depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.). The second category, “Visualizing Impacts on Mental Health,” includes pieces associated with outside factors that often negatively impact mental health (i.e., isolation, grief, confusion). The last category, “Picturing Healing,” includes pieces representing the ways the artists find relief from mental health issues.

This stage of pulling works together is also when I was able to start work shopping a title for the digital exhibition. After doing some research, I was having a challenging time coming up with a creative, catchy title that, in a few words, encapsulated the diverse works I had received. Eventually, I asked one of the artists who had submitted a piece what she thought and together, we were able to come up with the title *The Mind’s Release*. When creating artwork, artists “release” their emotions into their work and, in doing so, “release” these emotions out into the world. This idea of emotional release really worked with the research that has been done on the relationship of mental health issues and art. In addition, it felt like it fit quite well tying the submitted works together.

In order to ensure proper exhibition and curatorial practices in this process, Breezy Taggart and I decided to send out art release forms to each artist who had submitted their work, having them give us permission to include their work on the website for a limited amount of time as well as present them at the University. Since I do not own these works, they are not included in this reflection. However, before December 31, 2022, individuals will be able to view their works on the website: <https://sites.google.com/view/themindsrelease/home>. Because of the digital component, this project is open ended as well as accessible. There is the possibility that it will continue to grow, even after the semester ends. This project has the potential to be added upon throughout my future academic and career endeavors – with different works continuing forward. The formal completion of my Capstone Project for the Honors College does not mark the end of its potential impact.

In light of the in-person event not taking place, I had the opportunity to present the digital exhibition at the Undergraduate Research and Inquiry Day (URID) at the University of Wyoming. Part of the goal I had in creating this digital space was spreading awareness and understanding about mental health issues, so still being able to present this in-person was exciting. At URID, I was able to walk the audience through the completed website, showcasing the works as well as the statements I had received from the artists. The feedback I got was positive, people expressing interest in the works and what they represented.

I hope to facilitate empathy and understanding for people who struggle with mental health through this project. Since I have only recently gotten the website to the final stages, I have yet to see a larger reaction to the digital exhibition. However, based on the feedback I got at URID as well as the feedback from my mentor, Breezy Taggart, I am optimistic that this digital space will foster empathy and understanding from viewers. This project furthered my skills in

planning, adapting, and implementing a long-term project. I was able to build professional relationships with professors at the University of Wyoming as well as with the artists who submitted works to the exhibition. More importantly, this project has furthered my own empathy and understanding for diverse mental health issues as I head into graduate school and the mental health field.

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