

ARTS AND HEALTH

FOUR BIG WAYS TO IMPROVE

HEALTH THROUGH THE ARTS

Tasha Golden, PhD



“We made the world we’re living in and we have to make it over.”

— James Baldwin

Before we dive into how to improve health through the arts, we have to ask what “health” *is*. Often, the word brings to mind doctors and clinics, or individual factors like stress, diet, exercise, sleep.

But health is mostly determined by “**social determinants of health**,” things like education and employment opportunities, clean air and water, transportation and housing, access to nutritious food and green spaces, etc. The contexts we live in shape our opportunities to be healthy. In fact, social determinants are so influential that a person’s zip code can determine their life expectancy.

The Social Ecological Model of Health



Adapted by Tasha Golden @2019

*Improving health
for all requires
that we improve
our contexts.*

The Social Ecological Model (above) helps visualize this by showing that the “individual-health” circle is *inside* several other contexts. Looking at health this way, we get clearer on why there are health **disparities** across geographic, racial, gender, economic, and other differences. They’re a result of disparities in policies, opportunities, histories, sociocultural norms, resource availability, and more.

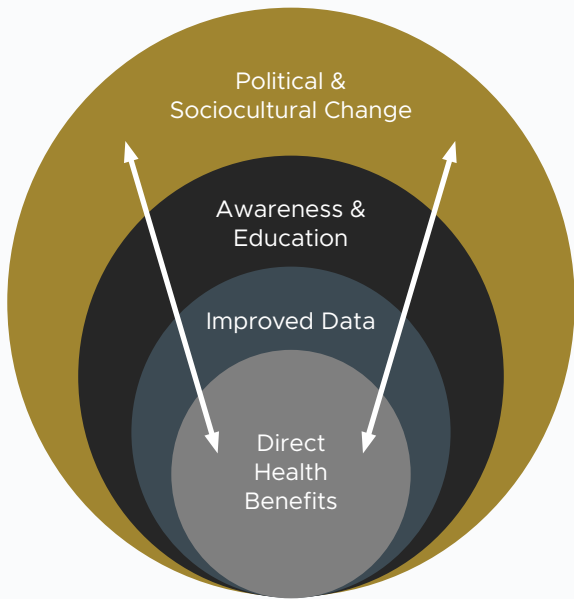
In short, improving health for all requires that we improve our *contexts*.

But improving our contexts is no small undertaking...
And this is where the arts come in.

We can't change the outer levels of the social ecological model without immense creativity and innovation, without many more voices and perspectives. And these are precisely what art offers. With applications from the individual to the cultural, art expands our ability to create health.

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Arts in Public Health: Opportunities for Impact



Tasha Golden @2019

A Place to Begin

My goal in this book is to stimulate innovation and action, and that starts with a **new model for art's potential health impacts** (left). Echoing the "social ecological model," it *includes* individual health ("Direct Health Benefits")—but it doesn't stop there.

Grounded in my research and practice at intersections of arts and public health, this model shows four domains in which the arts can impact health: direct benefits, improved data, awareness and education, and political and sociocultural change.

In reality, this model's four domains greatly affect and overlap one another, which is shown by the arrows. But we'll consider each separately, helping you tackle new angles and opportunities for your work—whether you're an artist, public health practitioner, arts organization, funder, evaluator, or general creative human. Thinking about multiple contexts and health effects will widen our lens for innovation and meaningful change.

Direct Health Benefits

When people think about impacts of the arts on health, most think immediately of direct health benefits—such as those we might get from art or music therapy, or from the presence of art in healthcare settings. Others may think of the benefits we get from general arts access and participation.

For example, attending concerts or visiting museums has been shown to improve one's sense of physical and mental well-being; increasing studies show how various arts and cultural experiences support health; and new models of “**arts on prescription**” point to arts access as a factor in well-being (see Resources, below). Clearly, as a domain of impact, Direct Health Benefits is a significant and intuitive place to start. But it may just be the beginning.





What direct wellbeing benefits have you experienced from art? If you're an artist or work with an arts-based program, what benefits have your audiences or participants shared with you?

Improved Data

The arts also provide important and unique ways to improve what we know about ourselves, our contexts, and each another. It's probably not news to you that art creates unique spaces and opportunities to speak the otherwise unspeakable. What might be new is asking what this phenomenon means for health knowledge, for data collection, and for the development of effective policies and resources.



For example, in my work facilitating **creative writing workshops with incarcerated girls**, the data we receive from girls' poetry is vastly different from what we receive from health surveys. Participants' poems offer extensive insights about their needs and challenges, while also revealing their power and creativity. So two questions I regularly pose are:

1.

What do researchers and health providers *not know* about communities and populations, because we've limited the forms of data or knowledge that we ask for, or consider valid?

2.

How do our limited strategies perpetuate the very problems we're trying to address?

One of my recent studies was motivated by these questions. I was researching girls' and young women's experiences of violence, and decided not only to analyze several surveys, but also to develop three new *arts-based* methods for hearing from the population. This combination of methods gave us rich data, and it also let me compare the methods to each other. The findings (**published elsewhere**) indicate what you may be guessing: we can learn more and different information from art than surveys—including critical, actionable data about youth.

Put simply, there's so much we cannot know if we limit ourselves to conventional methods like surveys or interviews. If we want to improve health and health equity, we have to develop research strategies that are trauma-informed and culturally responsive...and this will require creative innovation. Art creates opportunities to share and build knowledge.





Art is a platform and forum for important knowledge and data. How could this fact enhance your program, and/or change how you ask questions? What could you and others learn from (or through) art?

Awareness & Education

We've long understood that art can improve communications related to health. Stories and compelling visuals are more memorable and shareable than statistics, and they can increase understanding and cultural relevance. In addition, public art like performances, exhibits, or publications create intuitive occasions for press coverage. **Earned media** can then help spread health messages, shift public opinion, or generate political will. And of course, art is recognized as an important means of reducing stigma related to mental illness, HIV, domestic violence, sexual assault, and other challenging issues. When stigma is reduced, social connectivity and healthcare access are improved.

Stories and visuals are memorable and shareable. They can also increase understanding and relevance.

Art can also raise awareness and shift communities' cultures and systems so that, for example, incidents of violence are decreased. And more generally, many artists are trusted community members whose messages are valued.

These benefits make artists and arts organizations ideal partners for public health practitioners who aren't sure how best to communicate or share information. And, artists and arts organizations can generate new impacts with their work when they intentionally tackle health needs like education and awareness.

For example, **Project Uncaged**, my creative writing program for justice-involved girls, publishes anthologies of participants' poems—often in partnership with well-known publishers and artists. These books are intended not only for the authors, but for policymakers and broad public dissemination. The goal is to raise awareness about an underserved and under-heard population, and to shift policies and resources that affect the writers' lives.



If you're in a health field, how could artists or art improve your work? As an artist or arts organization, how could your work help address health and wellbeing at another level of the model?

Political and Sociocultural Change

Finally, related to awareness and education, artists have historically been at the forefront of social movements—stimulating and sustaining collective action and political will. More broadly, art has the capacity to humanize populations and issues, offering new ways to see the “other.” This can shift people’s perspectives or assumptions in a way that leads to sociocultural change. These kinds of shifts are critical for persuading voters and legislators about needed policy changes, and for changing norms and narratives that perpetuate harm.

As the field of public health works to advance health, it will do well to partner with community artists and arts-engaged social movements that have organized and mobilized for change. Similarly, artists and arts organizations may find that their partnerships with health fields reveal new or newly-inspiring ways to address situations and policies that negatively affect health. Together, these fields can identify arts-based approaches that help organize, mobilize, re-narrate, and persuade toward shared goals.



What community, policy, or systems-level changes do you believe are important? What kinds of partners or partnerships could help you effect those changes?



Bringing Domains Together

Most arts-based programs, events, and funding opportunities aim for just 1-2 of the four broad domains this book has covered, leaving behind great possibilities for impact. For example, many youth arts programs seek to provide direct health benefits (therapeutic, educational), but don't recognize youths' art as a source of data, or as a platform for youth to change the hearts and minds of policymakers. Similarly, health researchers might use methods like photovoice to gather data and influence policy, but don't realize that photography could provide direct health benefits, too.

Thinking in multiple domains doesn't require overhauling current programs and starting from scratch. It's more like a creative process that can suggest new partnerships, priorities, and modes of outreach. It isn't about overextending ourselves, but about building networks and stimulating our imaginations.

The complex nature of the social determinants of health can make them difficult to measure and change. If we're going to improve well-being and health equity, we need innovative, cross-sector work that draws on diverse strengths and multiple ways of knowing. In short, we need arts and health to work together. The arts offer many forms of creativity, inquiry, and engagement—helping us see the world as it is, and helping us “make it over.”

Assorted Resources

[Arts on Prescription: A Field Guide for US Communities](#) (Golden et al., 2023).

[Creating Healthy Communities through Cross-Sector Collaboration: The Arts and Public Health in America](#) (Sonke, Golden, Francois, et al, 2019)

[What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review](#) (World Health Organization, 2019).

[Social prescription in the US: A pilot evaluation of Mass Cultural Council's "CultureRx"](#) (Golden et al., 2023)

[Arts, Culture and Community Mental Health](#) (Golden, 2017)

[Creative Placemaking Can...](#) - Interactive resource about varied effects of arts/culture across community sectors (ArtPlace America, 2021)

[From Absence to Presence: Arts and Culture Help Us Redefine "Health"](#) (Golden, 2022)

[The NeuroArts Blueprint: Advancing the Science of Arts, Health, and Well-Being](#) (Johns Hopkins IAM Lab and Aspen Institute, 2021).

[Arts-Based Methods Improve Research Data, Trauma-Responsiveness, and Reciprocity](#) (Golden, 2022)

Want to know more about linking arts and health?

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