

MARTHA STEWART

Living

SPECIAL
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YEAR
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Plus
Toast the
Season
at Martha's



Healthy Hobbies

Now there's a truly compelling reason to put the creative pursuits you enjoy in your downtime much higher on your priority list: A growing body of research shows that hands-on activities—from knitting to sculpting to cooking—can boost your mental and emotional well-being for life.

To keep calm (and much more), craft on.

TEXT BY COTTON CODINHA

WHAT DO SALLY FIELD, Amanda Seyfried, Krysten Ritter, and Angela Merkel have in common? Unfortunately, it isn't costarring roles in a madcap multigenerational comedy. But the truth is nearly as delightful: They're all knitters or crocheters, known for getting busy with needles and yarn. Clacking away does more than pass the time, however. Knitting and other tactile hobbies, such as cooking, gardening, and firing ceramics (we see you, Brad Pitt and Seth Rogen), can significantly lower stress and boost happiness—even when you're not doing them, because of their lasting positive effects on your brain and body.

While the research confirming these benefits is fairly recent, our reliance on crafting to aid and soothe us during tough times is not. During the Civil War, families at home cranked out socks for soldiers, channeling their emotions into generating supplies. To cope with the Blitz, British citizens formed morale-boosting sewing circles. Similarly, after this spring's stay-at-home orders took effect, anxious people quickly went craft-crazy. Online tutorials have been jam-packed, with Michaels reporting a 70 percent jump in minutes viewed of its Facebook Live videos. And supplies, from Brother sewing machines to fabric for face masks, have been flying off online shelves. If you haven't started yet, here are three excellent reasons to dust off an old skill—or pick up a new one.

STYLING BY ELIZABETH PRESS

① TO REDIRECT YOUR MIND

The impulse behind all that embroidery you're seeing on social media is actually a survival instinct. "Our lives have been completely turned upside down. Like it or not, our brains are hardwired to pay attention to a threat," explains Craig Sawchuk, PhD, cochair of the psychiatry and psychology department's division of integrated behavioral health at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. "Picking up a craft and doing something within your control can turn down the volume knob on that threat-detection system when it's on overdrive. We are also hardwired toward novelty. Do something different, and your brain will start paying attention to it and break from the worry cycle." A 2008 study published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* illustrated just that when it explored the connection between rumination—the hamster wheel of self-doubt that keeps you up at night—and depression, anxiety, binge drinking and eating, and self-harm. It noted that mentally absorbing pastimes like knitting, practicing the piano, and playing tennis are especially effective at helping us tune out those negative thoughts. More recently, a 2016 study in *Art Therapy* showed that spending 45 minutes working with modeling clay, collage materials, or markers significantly reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol. When you dial down your cortisol, you also do your heart a big favor: A 2017 study published in *The Lancet* revealed that such stress is on par with smoking or having diabetes as a risk factor for future cardiovascular events like heart attacks and strokes.

And here's the best part: Many feel the zen effect immediately. A 2013 survey published in *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* asked respondents to rate their mood before and after knitting. Before, 23 percent rated themselves as a little bit to very sad. Afterward, fewer than 1 percent said they remained sad; the number of respondents rating themselves as happy also jumped from 34 percent to 81.5 percent. And the serenity continues to sink in. Depending on the activity, says Sawchuk, "there are lots of areas of the brain becoming activated. It's not like hitting a light switch; it's more like turning up a dimmer. It takes a little time and practice to gain momentum." That's why he suggests starting slow and being consistent, whether you're learning to cook, building a birdhouse, or making paper flowers.

② TO FORTIFY YOUR MEMORY

In addition to offering quick stress relief, a creative outlet can help protect your recall powers as you age. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic reported in 2017 that engaging in a craft was even better at preventing cognitively normal people ages 70 and older from developing mild cognitive impairment than socializing with others or playing games. A 2011 study published in *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* discovered that activities like knitting and crocheting could reduce the odds of developing mild cognitive impairment by 30 to 50 percent, and a 2014 University of Texas at Dallas study of elderly subjects showed that learning to quilt or take digital photographs significantly increased memory function.

③ TO RELIEVE CHRONIC PAIN

It sounds counterintuitive, given the need for nimble fingers, but DIY diversions can relieve physical issues such as arthritis and aches from past injuries, too. *Help Heal Veterans*, a California-based nonprofit, provides kits to veterans suffering from physical, emotional, and traumatic disorders, such as PTSD. Whether they are building models, braiding leather keychains, or beading bracelets, they say the activities give them relief. "Some veterans who have lingering injuries tell us that being immersed in making something helps their pain management," says Keith Stuessi, MD, the organization's director and a former U.S. Navy doctor. Participants also remark that crafting in groups at their clinics or at home with family makes them feel less isolated and lonely. "It provides something to bond over," he adds.

If you're concerned about all your output piling up by the sofa, we have a remedy for that, too. Claire Sheldon, a senior assistant buyer at Bloomingdale's in New York City, ordered a needlepoint kit in April after seeing an influencer's masterpiece on Instagram. She has been working at it for months, in weekly intervals. "It doesn't take a lot of brainpower—I can watch a movie in the background—but it distracts me and gives me an activity," she says. Sheldon already has a plan for her finished design: "A friend of mine has been commenting on my progress, and it would make a nice surprise for her." That's two more mental-health boons: the pleasure of giving, and room for her next project. To learn where you can donate your handiwork, see Meet Some Makers, right.

Meet Some Makers

To fully reap crafting's rewards, it pays to find your community. These online forums will inspire you, talk you through snags, applaud your home runs, and help you unload your stockpile.

RAVELRY

ravelry.com

Connect with 10 million fellow knitters, crocheters, spinners, weavers, and dyers, all sharing patterns, tracking projects, and geeking out over favorite stitches in 13,000 special-interest groups. The community describes itself as "inclusive and friendly"—a safe place for all ideas.

CRAFTJAM

craftjam.co

Join a like-minded group for live video classes in needle-felting, calligraphy, watercolor painting, hand-lettering, macramé, and more, led by expert teachers. Tickets for the Web-Jams start at \$20; for \$40 and up, you can get the class and a supply kit.

NEWBORNS IN NEED

newbornsinneed.org

Booties, blankets, and soft toys are on this charity's wish list. Local chapters deliver handknit donations to hospitals and social-service and pregnancy centers across the U.S. They ask that you avoid wool yarn, since many babies are allergic.

SNUGGLES PROJECT

snugglesproject.org

A Snuggle is like a binky for a puppy or kitten. This org links crafters with animal shelters in need of them. It's a win-win: The blankets comfort the animals and also make the shelter look more inviting, so would-be adopters linger long enough to fall in love.