Craft Kits
Beyond the Basics…
How They Transform Lives

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During the many years I’ve worked as a CCS for HHV, I have observed numerous phases of creative discovery that reflect veterans’ experiences with the program. I can say that whether a novice or professional crafter, each becomes immersed in their unique vision for outcomes. They may achieve a state of “flow”, a state coined by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Because our nervous system is only capable of processing a certain amount of information at a time, while creating we are absorbed in the moment, suspending stressful thoughts, pain, loss etc. The science community dating back many years has described the health benefits of these creative activities as individuals participate in the visual and performance arts. Recent studies indicate that crafting may have the same benefits to the mind as cognitive activities such as crossword puzzles, games and reading books. Although further research is needed, crafting is truly medicine that doesn't come in a bottle. When one is engaged in a project, a calm similar to the relaxation experienced while meditating is present. As stress melts away, feelings of happiness and well being replace it. We as CCS’s witness this phenomenon daily, as we assist veterans with the program, and in doing so grow and develop as crafters, artists, and human beings.

Csikszentmihalyi is one of the pioneers of the scientific study of happiness. He was born in Hungary in 1934 and, like many of his contemporaries, he was touched by the Second World War in ways that deeply affected his life and later work. During his childhood, he was put in an Italian prison, where amid the misery and loss of family and friends he had his first inkling of his seminal work in the area of flow and optimal experience. In an interview, he noted, “I discovered chess was a miraculous way of entering into a different world where all those things didn’t matter. For hours I’d just focus within a reality that had clear rules and goals” (sohbel, D. 1995, January.)

He met Carl Jung, (psychiatrist and founder of the school of analytical psychology), in Switzerland which sparked his interest in psychology. With limited options in Europe for further development in this emerging field, he went to the U.S.
He had dabbled in painting as an artist and began observations and studies on artists and creative types. He noted that the act of creating seemed at times more important than the finished work itself and was fascinated by what he called the “flow” state, in which the person is completely immersed in an activity with intense focus and creative engagement. I often use the phrase ‘process over product’ when facilitating veterans with their crafts. I think having an open mind during the production of crafts affects HOW one arrives at completion, creating less tension and more joy. Unlike math and other fields there is no right answer but an ever changing chance to begin again. To see differently and tweak that wood basket kit until it feels completed.

I would like to introduce a special guest speaker this morning, art therapist Jenn Ross. She has generously offered to share with us some of her experiences with veterans, their families and friends at Wesley place where she coordinates the HHV craft program.

I would like to briefly review the elements to achieve FLOW:

1. **Clear goal every step of the way**

2. **There is immediate feedback to ones actions**

3. **There is a balance between challenges and skills**

4. **Action and awareness are merged**

5. **Distractions are excluded from consciousness**

6. **There is no worry of failure**

7. **Self consciousness disappears**

8. **The sense of time becomes distorted**

9. **The activity becomes an end in itself**
Mihalyi states:

“As the qualities indicated, the flow like state is not characterized by subjective feelings, even positive ones. Rather, the essence of flow is the removal of the interference of the thinking mind.”

Michael & Valerie Hobbs

Army veteran Michael and his wife Valerie are both dedicated volunteers. Michael attended the Blind Center in 2003 at Hines VAMC where he learned manual and living skills.
Dave Nicolosi

Dave has been with HHV for one year. He was in the USAF from 2002 -15. He has a B.A. in Art & Design and is a talented artist.

Rose Schmidt

Rose Schmidt has been with HHV since 2008. Along with being a full time Lead CCS, she has an interior decorating business. She enjoys jewelry making and wood crafting with recycled materials, but her greatest joy comes from spending time with her three grandsons.
Now I’d like to turn to more recent developments in neuroscience and its connection to crafting. Crafting is unique in that it involves different areas of the brain; working your memory and attention span while involving visuospatial processing (relating to the visual perception of the spacial relationship of objects), and problem solving. It also releases dopamine (a neurotransmitter in the central nervous system, retina, and sympathetic ganglia acting within the brain to help regulate movement and emotion) from the reward center of the brain when you do something pleasurable, acting as a natural anti-depressant. It reduces cortisol (the fight or flight hormone) and can relieve stress.

The myth that creative people use the right side of the brain has been debunked. The whole brain (both hemispheres of the brain communicating with each other) is used while art making. Leonard da Vinci said, “Painting embraces all the ten functions of the eye; that is to say, darkness, light, body and color, shape and location, distance and closeness, motion and rest.” This explains why the idea of participating in stimulating, enjoyable activities can stave off dementia and cognitive impairment. Crafting improves self efficacy or how we feel about performing particular tasks. The feeling of satisfaction when completing a kit for a loved one, can help during challenging times in life. It increases self worth and a sense of accomplishment when a craft is shared and admired.

The brain is no longer considered a static organ. Research has shown that our brains are flexible and adapt to their environment, even in old age. This is called brain plasticity. As you engage in a new, complex activities such as crafting, your brain creates new connections between brain cells, increasing psychological resilience and resistance to stress.

In closing I have some interesting and fun activities to do yourselves and share with the veterans you serve. Anti-stress coloring books were popularized in France as a tool used by art therapists for PTSD and other health challenges. The country is number one per capita for the consumption of anti-depressants, tranquilizers and sleep medications. Coloring books can be useful as stress relief as well as for artistic expression.
The experience of simply viewing works of art gives pleasure. Brain scans reveal that looking at art triggers a surge of dopamine in the same area of the brain that registers romantic love. We can’t always attend galleries and museums but a great way to enjoy art is by using the Daily Art app. It highlights one masterpiece painting a day along with a background story.

I also recommend watching a short video entitled “Can Art be Medicine?” from The Foundation for Art & Healing. Sound familiar? It is very interesting and personal.

As we work each day at HHV, this information again shows us the importance of our environment. If you work at a CBC, showcase samples in colorful and interesting ways to engage the veteran. If not, photos or sample of kits inspire veterans who may look at a bag of parts and feel overwhelmed or tuned out. We as CCS’s provide the tools and enthusiasm to help veterans begin their creative journey, as well as our own.

**Picasso said “Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life.”**

I think it accomplishes that and a whole lot more.

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**Bibliography/references**

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“This is Your Brain on Crafting” by Jacque Wilson 1/2015

CognitiveTherapeutic Method - “Arts and Craft Projects to Improve Brain Health” - 12/2014

“The Mental Health Benefits of Art Are for Everyone”
Deane Alban

Ted Talks featuring Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi