

The zen in stitch and bitch

by M. Auch published in [TxP](#) november 2020

The most commented on episode of the American sit com 'The Big Bang Theory', shows super nerd Sheldon Cooper at a loom, furiously weaving poncho's. For the uninitiated: Sheldon, the most brilliant in a group of scientists just got sacked. He is under severe stress. With unique logic he explains: 'I was working with luminous fish and thought - LOOM'. Labelled with Asperger's syndrome he is incapable of managing sudden change. However - through weaving, i.e. engaging in a meaningful, productive and repetitive action he reorganizes his brain. He calms down, stabilizes and goes back to work.

Why does our brain love arts and crafts?

This is the content of some interesting research conducted in Finland at Aalto University. While every knitter, embroiderer, weaver and craft practitioner knows and experiences the relaxing state of making with your hands, i.e. the delicious state of flow, it is interesting to identify the underlying mechanisms. Could they - easily available and low cost measures - be implemented in therapy and preventive health care? The underlying mechanisms of how creative practice improves our well-being are being widely researched.

Crafting is unique in its ability to involve many different areas of the brain, which can be mapped by MRI technique. Crafting involves the memory and attention span, visuospatial processing, the creative and problem-solving abilities. Engaging in a crafting process means to move out of the stress mode of fight and flight response and to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which dampens internal chaos. Additionally, the reward center in the brain releases a neurotransmitter called dopamine, a natural anti-depressant. This is triggered by overcoming problems and admiring a finished, beautiful piece of work.



The author all wired up at the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience, mapping dexterity through scientific data for the Stitch Your Brain project. Photo: M. Auch

Stitching

There are supportive factors to get into that healthy, delicious state of FLOW. The zen-factor in 'stitch and bitch' lies in the caption. Ideally the 'stitching' project has to be a meaningful, repetitive yet challenging task. In that way it involves cognitive learning which improves self-efficacy. Psychologists believe a strong sense of self-efficacy is key to how we approach new challenges and overcome disappointments in life. Realizing you can weave poncho's for your friends can help to tackle the next job application or scientific task. The involvement of many different parts of the brain during crafting can enhance brain functions at later stages in life even counteracting dementia. Neuroplasticity is a newly coined phenomenon, meaning that human brains never stop developing if stimulated adequately e.g. by art projects.

Bitching

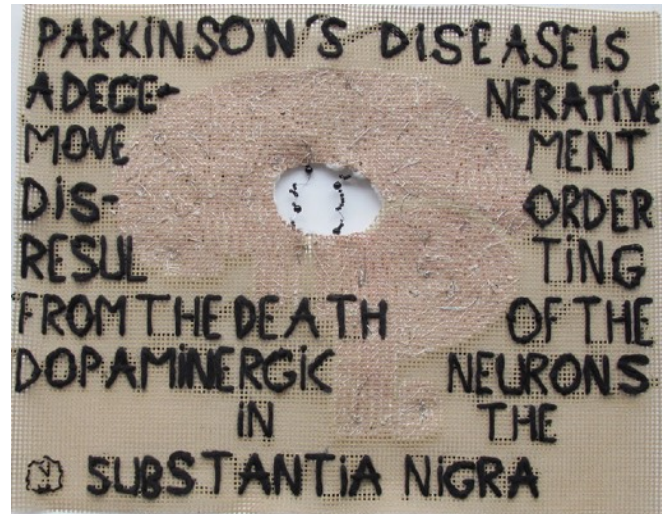
Bitching - #gatherings, #women, #talking and knitting - refers to the positive effects of communal making. Part of the explosive interest in textile crafting is linked to the well-being of social communities, e.g. the 'Sewing as a Form of Self-care' project described on the [Fashion Textile Museum](#)'s blog, [Claire Wellesley Smith's covid-19 stitch journal](#) or the long running AIDS-quilt project. Making as practiced in arts and crafts is crucial for creating social cohesion and for emotional bonding especially during uncertain and challenging circumstances.



A gigantic tapestry of AIDS quilts in Washington D.C. The NAMES Project Foundation. Photo: M. Thiessen

Zen

Stitch and bitch adds up to more than a great craft piece, it brings zen - no need to follow a mindfulness workshop - get out your tools and stitch, weave, felt with your community!



Personal statements by participant Klara van Langveld of the [Stitch your brain project](#):

'Stitching the brain turned out to be a confronting experience. It forced me to think about what happens in the brain of a loved one diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

The medical language is actually incomprehensible since it has little to do with the experience of someone's body, feelings and emotions. Neither for the one diagnosed, nor for his or her loved ones. But the " P " word is always in mind. It's like looking at a language you can't read, trying to figure out what it tells you. It stares you in the face, it's a black scenario.'

Photo: M. Auch

The back of the canvas shows the readable text. Photo: M. Auch

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Bio

[Monika Auch](#) has a background in medicine and textile design with a focus on weaving. A hybrid of science and art, she set up the [Stitch Your Brain](#) project and [Weeflab](#) in Amsterdam to investigate 'The intelligence of the hand'.

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