How does an artist make art? How is the artistic spark anchored in the brain? Why does Parkinson’s disease possibly have an answer to this? And how can creative work and art help people with Parkinson to heal?

An international consortium of art researchers and neuroscientists (PI Matthew Pelowski, Co-PIs Julia S. Crone & Blanca T. M. Spee), physicians (with leading Parkinson’s specialist Bastiaan R. Bloem), and a team of art therapists, artists, and health specialists in learning and education have come together to pool their expertise in the unique #ConnectingMinds project “Unlocking the Muse.”

The approach to connect medicine and art research was born from the idea that, on the one hand, art making is an essential part of human communication with high relevance for culture, psychology but also neuroscience. On the other hand, in the last twenty years, physicians and researchers have increasingly reported case studies showing that in people with Parkinson’s disease the propensity, interest and even the ability to create art changes. Why creative behavior changes so much in these individuals, what this tells us about the disease itself and the creative spark, and how, when investigated, this knowledge can be used to help people with Parkinson’s—one of the fastest growing neurodegenerative diseases in the world—is still unclear.

To find answers to all these questions, the “Unlocking the Muse” consortium has chosen to foster dialogue between research, the medical community, social practice partners in health care, and people with Parkinson’s. Within the project’s various programs, the team is investigating, along clear research questions, how the brain can be creatively stimulated in both healthy and dysfunctional states in order to gain new neurobiological insights. Further programs will solicit experiences from people with Parkinson’s and therapists to develop creativity-based art therapies in coordination with social practice partners in the arts sector, creative therapy, and the health education sector. Essential here is that the consortium takes first steps to establish both the research program and a specialized multidisciplinary therapy and education center in Austria, along the model of ParkinsonNet, which is already successfully optimizing multidisciplinary patient treatment in the Netherlands. The main focus of the project is to understand a deeper understanding of the neurobiological basis of the brain, along art-based methodology, as well as to promote an advancement in capacity building and education of young and senior researchers, physicians, health professionals, and patients and their caregivers.