

Helping Elders Live with Dementia, Including Alzheimer's

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The Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics estimates that by 2030, 20 percent of the population will be 65 or older, compared with 13 percent in 2000. With this population explosion comes a growing concern about mental health issues related to older Americans. In 1998, severe depressive symptoms were diagnosed in 15 percent of people age 65 to 79, 21 percent of people age 80 to 84, and 23 percent of people age 85 and older. According to a landmark report in the September 1999 *Archives of General Psychiatry*, the number of elderly Americans who suffer from a mental illness is projected to grow to approximately 15 million by 2030, compared to 4 million in 1970.

Moreover, every 70 seconds, somebody in the U.S. is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. Approximately 5.3 million Americans have Alzheimer's. If nothing is done to reverse current trends, we will have a projected 11-16 million Alzheimer's patients by 2050, according to a new report by the Alzheimer's Association.¹

In a society that values youth and productivity, many of these elderly have limited access to mental health services; few receive the support they need to alleviate symptoms. The emphasis in most assisted living facilities is primarily on the physical needs of the residents— *have they eaten? taken their medications? been bathed?* This, combined with staffing shortages, and a growing trend whereby elders are being cared for at home by inexperienced, albeit loving, family members, means that millions of older adults' needs for psychological support are not being met.

Issues of depression, loneliness, forgetfulness, powerlessness, and communication problems can be painful and difficult to deal with. Elders confronting these challenges who have an outlet by which to express them are less likely to feel isolated and overpowered by the accompanying emotions. Whether institutionalized or not, seniors can benefit from art therapies and other expressive arts. All humans are creative, but for those living with dementia, that impulse may need to be supported and encouraged by others trained to foster creative expression.

New research on psychological growth and development among the older population has led to a new understanding of our capacity for positive change and creative expression in the second half of life. The latest research on human development confirms that we have an inner drive that fosters psychological growth throughout our lifecycle. Gene Cohen (2006) says, "...As we age, these inner drives manifest themselves in various ways. The changing characteristics of a new phase of life and the changing developmental dynamics of the inner push reveal themselves as a series of developmental challenges in the second half of life."²

¹ Alzheimer's Association, 2010 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures, *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, Volume 6

² Cohen, Gene D (2006). Research on Creativity and Aging: The Positive Impact of the Arts on Health and Illness. In *Generations*. San Francisco: Spring 2006. Vol. 30, Issue. 1, p. 7-15 (9 pp.)

Over the past decade, more and more research has revealed the benefits of the arts on elders, especially those challenged by declining cognitive skills, memory loss, Alzheimer's, and other forms of dementia. Psychologists, gerontologists, and other medical professionals are scrambling to find tools with which to increase our life expectancy and to provide a higher quality of life in our last years. What pops out, again and again, are the mental, emotional, medical, and spiritual benefits of the arts on the aging population, wherever they live.

Among those benefits:

- Regularly playing a musical instrument can delay the onset of Alzheimer's by up to five years.
- Singing increases quality of life for senior populations.
- Art therapy sessions improve elders' mood and cognition more than just social activities.
- Individuals show more interest, greater sustained attention, more enjoyment, and greater self-esteem when involved in an art program.
- An active and creative life makes it easier to face adversity, including the loss of a loved one.
- Creativity reinforces essential connections between brain cells, promotes well being, and boosts the immune system.
- Creativity reduces the need for psychotropic medications.³
- Music-making is therapeutic, especially for Alzheimer's patients; it stimulates cognitive activities and decreases agitation.

For those with dementia, music therapy is one of the most successful interventions. In Canada an estimated 65 percent of music therapists work with the cognitively impaired elderly. In a review of special-care units, staff rated the effectiveness of different interventions, and music therapy was rated the most effective intervention for this population (Gutman, p. 49)⁴.

Art therapy (or art psychotherapy) taps into the creativity within each person and helps enhance that person's well being. Art therapists work with a variety of demographics, including children victimized by domestic violence, suicidal adolescents, refugees traumatized by war, disaster survivors, war veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, and older adults living with dementia.

Both anecdotal and scientific evidence suggest that the quality of life of Alzheimer's patients is significantly improved with music therapy. D. Aldridge (1994) said "Music therapy, when based on clear treatment objectives can reduce the individual prescription of tranquilizing medication, reduce the use of hypnotics and help overall goals of rehabilitation.

³ D. Aldridge (1994), conducted research with the focus, "Alzheimer's disease: rhythm, timing and music as therapy". In the *Biomedical Pharmacotherapy* journal, vol. 48, no. 7, pp. 275-81, 1994, Through this study he concluded that music-making provided a form of therapy for the Alzheimer's patient that stimulated cognitive activities such that areas subject to progressive failure are maintained.

⁴ Gutman, Gloria M., and Judy Killam. Special Care Units for Dementia: Staff and Family Perceptions. The Gerontology Research Centre, Simon Fraser University, 1991.

Mood improvement and self-expression, the stimulation of speech and organization of mental processes; and sensory stimulation and motor integration are promoted.”⁵

An article in *Alzheimer’s Australia* ⁶ explains: “Everyone is creative. Finding ways to express our creativity in dozens of different ways is part of being human. Some people enjoy cooking, others planting gardens, choosing clothes, arranging rooms, or inventing things...” In other words, creative expression is a basic human need.

At a brainstorming forum held at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, in November 2006, leading American researchers acknowledged that although more research was needed in the area of creativity, certain benefits of creativity for those challenged by dementia were indisputable. To wit:

- Positive emotional responses
- Reduced agitation
- Greater social engagement/interaction
- Improved cognitive processes
- Increased verbal fluency
- Functional improvements
- Increased food intake
- Weight gain
- Increased mobility
- Greater physical strength and balance
- Improved mood and attention span
- Less stress (caregivers and receivers alike)
- Elevated quality of life
- Greater understanding of the human condition

Here are some tips for maintaining communication with a person living with dementia who can no longer actively create. To do this well, you need to engage with your own sense of wonder and joy.

Music and Singing with Elders

Many studies have documented the benefits of music for elders. According to one report, a man in his seventies with Alzheimer’s, who previously did not talk, joined a local choir and within weeks showed dramatic improvement. He was able to hold lucid conversations with his spouse and demonstrated a new sense of well-being to witnesses aware of his history. Another report concludes that when Karaoke is offered at an assisted-living facility, elders who are usually quiet suddenly come alive; for a few moments each week, they are able to participate with others in an activity they can still do. Their otherwise

⁵ D. Alridge cf.

⁶ BAINES, P. (2007) Quality Dementia Care. Nurturing The Heart. Creativity, Art Therapy and Dementia. Australian Government September 2007.

cloudy minds become clear; thanks to a rhythm and sound that fosters memories of gone years.

Poetry Therapy with Elders

Poetry gives each of us a voice. For elders who often feel powerless and forgotten, poetry offers a potent way for their voices to be heard. Read poetry aloud; choose rhythmic verses and both familiar and unfamiliar poems

Sandtray with Elders

Carl Jung's work with symbols is powerfully illustrated in the use of sandtray⁷. This tool provides the aging population with another language to express emotions, fears, and personal experience.

Using Drama and Play with Elders

The magic of drama, story, and play can be explored by using theatrical elements to assist elders in playing out unfinished life issues. These elements let us participate in their stories—and support them in the process.

Building a Scrapbook of History and Memories

Building a scrapbook with our elders can be hugely beneficial for them and for their family members. Photos and stories will spark memories and give them a way to share their personal journey. P. Baines suggests⁸ making up a small box of interesting objects that can be taken out, held, and discussed. Women may enjoy bits of lace; fragments of silk; or shiny, colorful objects such as shells, jewelry, or tiny unthreatening animals. Men may prefer polished stones, fossils, packets of seeds, drill keys (the one which unlocks four different sizes is a lovely shape), old pipes, toy cars. As a family member you may have access to familiar objects that have been important to your elder.

Scarves, Color and Movement

The use of color can stimulate, relax, and help elders feel more alert. Color has a direct impact on all of us, but it is especially important for elders who have limited movement. Scarves provide an inspiring way for elders to move and participate with others. Naida Weisberg (2001)⁹ believes the movement and colorful aspects of working with scarves help develop connections and express emotions as people attribute emotions and expressions to the fabrics. For wheelchair-bound seniors, scarves allow reaching out and connecting with others. You can add music and create a type of ballet.

Daily Activities Can be Meaningful and Adapted to Your Elder

If your elder is unable to speak, or speaks only with great difficulty:

- Tell her stories about the world. Describe walking along the beach, watching a sunrise, children playing in the garden . . .
- Go slowly through picture books, like art, garden, or travel books.

⁷ *Sandtray or Sandplay therapy* is a dynamic and expressive form of psychotherapy that allows clients to express their inner worlds through symbol and metaphor towards a goal of healing. Its founder was the Swiss therapist Dora M. Kalff (1904-1990), who based her theories on the principles of Jungian psychology and on the work of Margaret Lowenfeld.

⁸ Cf

⁹ Weisberg, Naida Ed. (2001). *Expressive Arts with Elders*. Jessica Kingsler Publishers, Ltd. London, England.

- Give her things to hold and feel that have pleasing textures, like shells, leaves, or cotton.

In Sum

One tragedy of Alzheimer's is the marked deterioration of memory and the loss of connectedness with significant others. Again, this is where art and creative opportunities in a “strengths-based approach” come into play.

According to Gene Cohen, (2006)¹⁰ “The optimal treatment of the patient focuses not just on clinical problems but also on the individual potential of that person. It is only when problems and potential are considered together that health is best promoted and illness best cared for. This is the ultimate art and creativity of medicine and healthcare, bringing hope and clarity to situations that might otherwise be challenged by despair and confusion.”

More research needs to be done to reinforce what those of us in the field of Geriatrics already know. As we approach a time when baby-boomers will increasingly populate our nursing homes, people must be educated on the benefits of the arts upon dementia. We need to ensure that our elders' quality of life not suffer the fate of generations before them.

Mr. Eddy, a wise client of mine, taught me¹¹ that people with dementia are not necessarily de-mented, and that if we make the effort to learn a different language, we can communicate with our elders and understand the richness of their experiences. First, we need to change our views of elders and recognize that despite their diminishing mental abilities, they still possess a soul.

¹⁰ Cf

¹¹ Bersing, D (2006) One clinician's search for the person behind the ‘DEMENTIA’ *Aging Today: September-October 2006*

