

Benefits of art engagement for seniors

By Jodi Schneider
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Current studies in the fields of art therapy, music therapy, and other creative endeavors confirm that art can affect individuals in positive ways, inducing both psychological and physiological healing. Exercising our creative selves enhances quality of life and nurtures overall well-being.

Research also indicates that the arts can increase motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence while encouraging communication and nurturing cognitive function in older adults.

People today are living longer and embracing new and different activities well into their older years. As we age, participation in the arts positively affects our health.

The Creativity and Aging Study conducted between 2001 and 2007 with Gene Cohen, MD, Ph.D., as the primary researcher, found seniors active in arts had better physical health, fewer visits to the doctor, required less medication, and fell less frequently than those in the study not involved in arts. Arts in the study referred to “art and cultural disciplines, such as painting, pottery, dance, music, poetry, drama, material culture, and oral histories in a creative context.” The study’s results reinforce the need for these types of activities in senior living communities.

Engaging in art aids in relaxation, reduces anxiety and depression, and provides a sense of control.

Art and other creative projects can help alleviate boredom and keep seniors’ minds busy and may even help prevent feelings of loneliness.

Activity directors/recreation directors and occupational therapists have used art for decades in senior centers and other long-term care facilities. These art activities are often used to provide residents with something constructive to do and to address physical and motor issues.

In memory care, art can have transformative effects. A senior who can no longer write or use language cohesively may be able to paint in many colors or reveal a part of their past in an image. Due to such expressions, family and friends often feel strengthened connections.

Willow Durant, artist and recreation manager for Juniper Springs Senior Living in Redmond, said, “I am a strong advocate and believer in the healing power of art. My own journey exploring various forms of artistic expression has been instrumental in my personal healing.

“For seniors addressing life changing events, art can provide a way to express feelings and move through challenges in a transformative manner. It can be a form of meditation, an opportunity to take time to be still and

silent and get lost in the moment and the process of creating.”

Durant added, “I believe that one of the most important aspects of group art classes for seniors is that it brings people together in community. Painting, crafting, singing, dancing, writing poetry, any form of creative expression in a group helps individuals bond and feel support.”

Recent clinical research validates what some professionals and others who work with older adults have known for years: that participating in art is an essential, vital component of activities that offer a wide range of health benefits. Several studies show that art can reduce the depression and anxiety that are often symptomatic of chronic diseases.

Neurological research shows that creating art can improve cognitive functions. Painting, drawing or even just viewing art causes the brain to continue to reshape, adapt, and restructure, expanding capacity.

According to Bruce Miller, MD, a behavioral neurologist at University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, while the brain inevitably ages, creative abilities do not necessarily deteriorate. Actually, the aging brain responds well to art by allowing the brain’s two hemispheres to work more as a team.

Many artists continue or begin their work as older adults. Michelangelo,



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER

Seniors benefit from art engagement in a variety of ways.

who lived to the age of 88, created art throughout his life. Willem de Kooning also continued working, even during the onset and progression of his Alzheimer’s disease. Examples of individuals who turned to art in their late adulthood include Grandma Moses and Grandma Layton. Grandma Moses began her career as a folk artist and painter in her 70s and continued for much of the remaining 30 years of her life. Grandma Layton took a contour drawing class at the age of 68 and continued to create for the rest of her life, crediting drawing with curing a 35-year depression.

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