

## The Image Is Beautiful; Connecting Through Art

By Marcy Maler, Program Manager

Studies show that the creation of art can enhance communication, brain function, and social interaction for people living with dementia. In fact, creating visual art can trigger dormant memories and emotions, inspiring conversation among these patients who normally struggle to express themselves. Further, when a person living with memory loss creates an artwork it stimulates the entire brain as she plans, remembers, creates patterns, and uses motor skills.

Creative techniques like drawing, painting, sculpting, or coloring as a form of self-expression can bring relief from the overwhelming emotions associated with memory loss. Roadblocks to verbal communication laid by dementia are bypassed through the artistic process, and a loved one can find a nonverbal way to express himself through the art. With a little help from you he can be encouraged to share nonverbal messages and symbols that can be found in his art. In addition, concentration and attention improves, and difficult behaviors associated with a diagnosis of dementia are often easier to mitigate even after the artistic activity is over.

Not only is a diagnosis of dementia stressful, but in some cases residential changes may be required and a loved one may have to be moved from her family home to a residential facility. She will certainly feel the loss of friends and family. Providing a means for artistic expression is an opportunity to work through that anxiety. Studies have found that art has a positive effect on health and illness; it helps individuals to relax, gives them a sense of control, reduces depression and anxiety, and even increases self-esteem. The relaxing nature of producing art can help manage stress while giving your loved one a creative outlet and may perhaps unlock some of



her hidden talents.

As dementia progresses, your loved one may no longer be able to write or use language to communicate, but he may be able to use colors or reveal images of his past. This form of expression can result in your loved one's ability to connect to family members and help him feel empowered and less isolated.

The artistic expression not only helps your loved one communicate, but it will boost her brain health. Creative abilities are one of the last cognitive impairments to be affected by dementia. Her brain will respond well to art as it strengthens communication between the two brain hemispheres.

Art is proven to be one of the powerful tools for stimulating the brain. Because creative activity stimulates a different part of the brain, it can help stimulate more positive feelings and stirs memories. She will find it easier to express emotions through art and may paint images of memories that she otherwise struggles to express. Be sure to ask questions about the representations: where the house is, who the people depicted are; the choices of colors (was the house blue? or is it blue because that is his favorite color); and the feelings associated with the depictions. Show your interest and your encouragement. The quality of the piece is of no consequence.

alzheimer's association®

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## Tips & Tools

Research suggests that artistic engagement may help to ease common behavioral symptoms of dementia like anxiety, agitation, and depression. It may also boost mood and self-esteem, and possibly help stimulate memory.

Consider painting, sculpture, drawing with large markers, or scrapbooking.

Artistic activities should consider abilities but should be age-appropriate, not childish.

The materials used, including paint or clay, should be safe and nontoxic.

Incorporate creativity in your weekly routine to make the experience even more comforting.

Caregivers can help their loved ones get started—suggesting a theme or guiding the first stroke of the paintbrush—but otherwise let their loved ones take charge.

Consider visiting a museum or watching art videos for inspiration.

Use positive feedback and avoid criticism.

Having an artistic outlet can help reduce physical symptoms associated with dementia as well. Engaging the fingers, hands, and arms while he is creating an artwork is a gentle but consistent physical activity that can promote better circulation and dexterity. Additionally, the relaxing nature of painting, sculpting, or drawing used as a symptom management technique and as a way to control discomfort, especially when done in conjunction with physical therapy or prescription medications.

Due to the stigma of memory loss, a person living with dementia will tend to feel a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. A person in the early stages of memory loss find themselves in early retirement, or step down from positions that become complicated or unmanageable. The feelings of isolation that are associated with this will need an outlet, which creative activity readily provides—a safe space in which feelings are fully encouraged. In art, there are few rules, no “right” or “wrong” ways to express oneself.

Completing tasks help us gain a sense of accomplishment. However, for a loved one living with memory loss his ability to complete regular tasks may be hindered, thus limiting his independence and sense of autonomy. Art, as a therapeutic tool, will offer choice and restore the sense of autonomy. The act of deciding on the color of paper or the use of pencils, markers vs. oil pastels will go a long way toward building self esteem. In having these choices to make, he will gain a sense of personal ownership and the finished piece will help him feel more confident and successful.

The act of holding a paintbrush, molding a piece of clay, or coloring a picture can help her focus on something tangible and enhance fine-motor skills. Making smooth strokes with a paint brush or marker is

soothing in itself. Mixing color combinations or gluing pictures to make a collage will not only be a distraction, but it provides her with an outlet for self expression, promotes relaxation, improves her mood, and helps reduce anxiety.

A good thing about creating art is that it is not just an activity that one does alone, but in a communal setting it can be directed as a shared experience. Guided instruction will build confidence in the skills of people who don’t consider themselves artistic. Depending on your loved one’s stage of dementia, participation in art lessons will help to bring him out of his tendency toward isolation and help him socialize. Many senior communities and memory care programs offer art classes. But if your loved one lives at home, you and other friends or family members can set aside some time each week to share in an artistic activity.

It is also important to recognize the importance of art in enhancing self understanding and insight that may not be available through other means. However, the greatest benefit in the creation of art by your loved one with dementia is that it provides interaction among young and old family members who can share in the activity.

Picture a grandchild enjoying the opportunity to communicate with a grandparent who had all but lost all forms of self-expression. The image is beautiful.

