

Enriching lives through art and creativity



In the PhotoWalk project, participants photograph the local environment



Wendy Schellhammer displays her work at a collaborative exhibition as part of the PhotoWalk creative project

We should all support the role of art and creativity in the lives of older people, write DR TRICIA KING and DR MEG POLACSEK

Across the broad fields of health, ageing and art, there is growing interest in the role of art and creativity in enriching the lives of older adults.

Artistic and creative activities range from painting to poetry and storytelling, weaving, dancing, singing and photography. Whatever form they take, art and creativity are known to improve mood and confidence, strengthen social engagement and improve wellbeing.

By helping people connect, think and feel, the act of being creative connects us to place and time, and gives us a stronger sense of self. However, before inviting participants into an arts or creativity program, it is important to understand their personal and cultural history.

Such as:

- what are their interests?
- what makes them happy?
- have they lived through a significant historical moment?
- has there been a recent change to their family relationships or living arrangements?

While these answers may be dramatically different for each person, there is enough variety within any arts and creativity program to accommodate individual needs and preferences.

Involvement in artistic and creative activities also brings physical benefits, like increased hand dexterity from holding a brush, or improved flexibility from dancing (which can also be a chair-based activity). Creativity, movement and connections come together in projects like 'PhotoWalk', where participants visit a local scenic reserve to connect with and photograph the environment.

In addition to the various benefits to overall health and wellbeing, art and creativity also play a role in combatting ageism. Arts programs are effective in fostering intergenerational communication and connection, and challenging negative stereotypes of older adults. Perhaps less well known is the importance of maintaining hearing by participating in music or singing.



Dr Tricia King



Dr Meg Polacsek

As advocates, researchers, supporters and caregivers, we should promote the transformative and therapeutic potential of the arts in enhancing the lives of older adults. Increasingly, partnerships are being formed between the creative arts and service providers.

Examples include artist-in-residence programs at aged care facilities, and community service providers offering programs like crafting, photographic walks, music making, dance, and creative writing workshops.

With this in mind, the Australian Association of Gerontology has launched a special interest group for creativity, art and design. Members are committed to identifying, amplifying and leveraging the potential of creativity, art and design – participating, performing, creating, and making – to positively transform the experience of ageing.

A priority of this new special interest group is to develop collaborative, multi-disciplinary strategies for implementing design and arts-based approaches into everyday practice. These strategies should be practical and adaptable to different needs, abilities and contexts.

By bringing together stakeholders from health, ageing, aged care and creative spaces, this special interest group enables cross-sector collaboration, information-sharing and support for the arts and creativity. In this way, it supports the building of arts health agendas into national policy. Membership of the special interest group is open to AAG members.

We encourage you to look for creative ways to engage the people you support, explore the impactful ways arts-based approaches can be used in your work, and advocate for the value of art in ageing research, policy and practice. ■
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