

HEALTH (/HEALTH/)

Dementia



(/health/dementia/)

The Beauty of Art Therapy

Painting and drawing classes allow those with dementia to express themselves in meaningful ways

by Victoria Sackett, **AARP** (<https://www.aarp.org>), June 25, 2018 |  Comments: 3

En español (<http://www.aarp.org/espanol/salud/salud-cerebral/info-2018/programas-de-arte-contra-la-demencia-alzheimer/?html?intcmp=AE-HLTH-TOSPA-TOGL-ES>) | A thick paintbrush moves across a piece of drawing paper, and slowly an image begins to emerge. As the page is transformed so is the painter; she appears increasingly less agitated. The fledgling artist, who has dementia (/health/dementia/info-2018/dementia-discovery-fund-donation.html), is taking part in Memories in the Making, a national art program of the Alzheimer's Association, sponsored by chapters across the country. The program helps people express their thoughts and emotions and share memories through painting, drawing and other creative projects.

“They may not seem to want to — or be able to — talk but can paint something that takes our breath away,” says Ruth Drew, director of family and information services for the Alzheimer's Association. “In nurturing, calm, supportive settings, they sometimes have moments of clarity and express things that shock us all.”

These structured art (/entertainment/arts-leisure/) programs help to give people with dementia “good moments, good hours and good days,” she says. “When people are engaged and supported, they probably sleep better, are less anxious, less depressed. The experience carries over to the rest of the day.” And, as Drew puts it, the goal is “happy humans.”

Susie Frey, a Denver-area art consultant, addresses one such group. “Vases and faces today,” she says. Each



ARTWORK: CHIYOKO LEE; PHOTOGRAPHY: ELINOR CARUCCI

Some dementia patients are able to express themselves and evoke memories through art, such as this image of a horse that reminded artist Chiyoko Lee of her childhood pony.

person gets a choice of subject. After they finish their paintings, Frey asks them details. “What’s your favorite color in it?” “Tell me about the fishing hole where you might have found this rainbow trout.” Answer: “It’s a secret.”

Losing language, gaining creativity

Many experts believe that art can help dementia patients express themselves. Creating art engages a different part of the brain than the part that we use for language.

Bruce L. Miller, M.D., professor of neurology and director of the Memory and Aging Center at the University of California, San Francisco, has concluded from his research that creativity can still emerge in people with dementia, depending on where it most affects the brain.

When dementia is localized to the left side of the brain, Miller says, patients experience progressive loss of language, “but tremendous visual creativity can emerge — sometimes painting or sculpture, or occasionally they become obsessed with their gardens. It’s beautiful and sad.” As the brain continues to degenerate over time, he says, newfound artistic ability reaches a peak and then diminishes.

“We think that in patients with language loss, the visual side of their brain stops being inhibited by the verbal side and that allows their visual creativity to be released,” says Miller. “We have evidence now from functional imaging that it’s actually happening.”

Even those who have displayed no artistic ability in the past may find an outlet, with help from trained facilitators. And those who have been artistic can find comfort in returning to a skill. Whatever the creator’s background, the art can depict memories from life before dementia.

“As they start, I ask them about what they’re painting,” Frey says. “It might be a farm. When they’re finished, I talk to them again, and the farm might have morphed into a seaside.”

Seeing flashes of joy

Kate de Medeiros, associate professor of gerontology at Miami (Ohio) University, calls these “meaningful moments ... flashes of joy and purpose, however fleeting or small.” Art, she says, can “bring people together, make bridges. It’s not about the past or performance. It’s not about what you can’t do but what you can do.”

The role that art and [visual creativity \(/health/healthy-living/info-2017/nea-culture-events-brain-mental-health.html\)](/health/healthy-living/info-2017/nea-culture-events-brain-mental-health.html) plays in the dynamics of dementia is the subject of a growing number of research studies. “Art therapy must have a great role to play in Alzheimer’s disease,” says Marc Flajolet, research associate professor at the Fisher Center for Alzheimer’s Research Foundation.

“Just like we know now that music is able to revive some memories that we thought were lost,” he says, “one can easily extrapolate these findings to art and to the visual system.”

'Wild Horse'

By Chiyoko Lee, 88, who lives with her chihuahua, Nikki, at Juniper Village in Aurora, Colo.

"During the war my dad paid for me to ride a pony on the beach in Japan. It was a kiddie horse. I was the youngest of four children. My mother was an artist and was always sketching. There were sketches all over our house. But when the B-29 American bombers came, the bombs burned our house down. We all cried. We stayed at my sister’s house. Then everyone started building back. On Aug. 15, 1945, when they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Japan finally gave up — after being so gung ho. I was dumbfounded after the mushroom-cloud bomb. The emperor came on the radio and in a different language said, 'The war is over.' We sat and cried."

'Cupcake'

By Rose Mary Griffiths, 86, resident of Juniper Village

"I got a cupcake once at a restaurant in Fraser, Colo., with my sister MaryAnn, I think. She was my younger sister — we got along very well. I like cupcakes, chocolate mostly. I made one once for my husband, Albert."

'Three Red Cardinals'

By Carol Corby, 80, resident of Juniper Village

"I like cardinals, but they’re noisy. I like the birds here better because they’re quiet."

'Fuchsia Flower'

By Katsuko Keating, 94, former resident of Juniper Village who emigrated from Japan; she makes her own clothes and enjoys doing tai chi.


"A long time ago I go to two-year college and the teacher taught me how to make flowers. It was my art teacher. But I’m no good! So I went to dressmaking school."

More on Brain Health


- [Dementia vs. Alzheimer’s: Which is it? \(/health/dementia/info-2018/difference-between-dementia-](/health/dementia/info-2018/difference-between-dementia-)



ARTWORK: CHIYOKO LEE; PHOTOGRAPHER ELINOR CARUCCI

 Painting of pink cupcake in a brown wrapper. Artist is a dementia patient.

ARTIST: ROSE MARY GRIFFITHS; PHOTOGRAPHY: ELINOR CARUCCI

 Painting of three red cardinals on a blue background. Artist is a dementia patient.

ARTIST: CAROL CORBY; PHOTOGRAPHY: ELINOR CARUCCI

 Painting of half of a fusia flower with a green background.

ARTIST: KATSUKO KEATING; PHOTOGRAPHY: ELINOR CARUCCI

[alzheimers/?html?intcmp=AE-HEA-DMT-EOA1](#)

- [Personalized music programs could ease some Alzheimer symptoms \(/health/brain-health/info-2018/music-therapy-alzheimers-symptoms/?html?intcmp=AE-HEA-DMT-EOA2\)](#)
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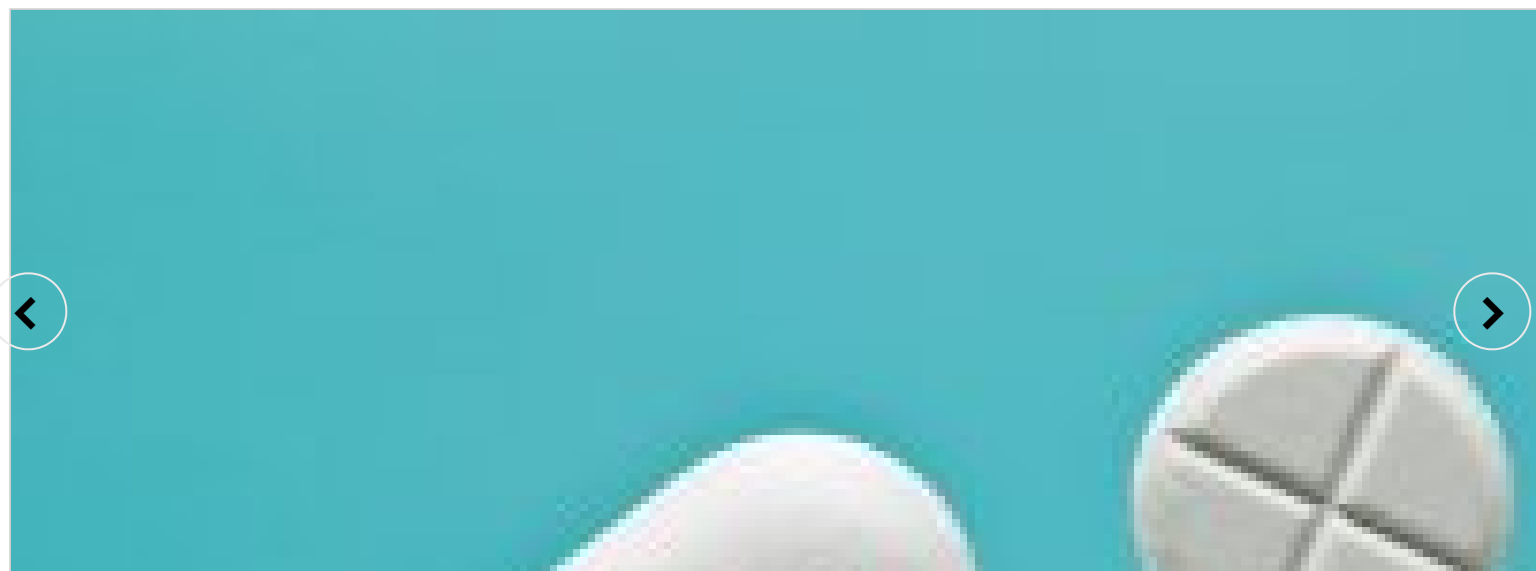




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