

Studies Suggest There's An Art to Getting Older

Creative Activity May Have Health Benefits

By Beth Baker

Special to The Washington Post Tuesday, March 11, 2008; HE01

In the Greenbelt Community Center, 25 elders sit in a circle, watching professional storyteller Candace Wolf. She moves around the circle, smiling, giving someone's shoulder a gentle squeeze, making eye contact. The artist, on the faculty of the nonprofit [Bethesda](#)-based Arts for the Aging (AFTA), enlists the group's help in creating a story, based on a silly photo she has passed around of a stocky older couple arm-wrestling.

Most of her listeners seem engaged, going along with the gag. "Why are they wrestling?" Wolf asks. "He wants to go out to a bar, but she won't let him," one woman suggests. "She's smarter than he is, too," says another. A man in the circle rolls his eyes. "Why is he so strong?" Wolf asks. "Used to work on the railroad," offers another woman.

Before long, a narrative has been spun, with threads offered by participants -- most of them people with dementia or other cognitive problems -- and woven by Wolf. She has adapted her storytelling workshops to this audience because studies suggest that making art, or even listening to music or viewing paintings, supports physical, mental and emotional well-being and eases some symptoms of illness, including dementia.

The idea is gaining traction. In 2006, artists, policymakers and aging experts held the first-ever national conference on the arts and aging in [Newark](#). Early this year attendance at two "webinars" on creativity and aging, hosted by the National Council on Aging, topped 100, exceeding the organizers' expectations. [New York](#) announced a \$1 million initiative to connect 57 of the city's arts and cultural organizations to 150 senior centers. And December's move to the District of the National Center for Creative Aging, founded in New York in 2001, promises closer ties with such

institutions as [George Washington University](#) and the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA).

The movement was bolstered in 2006 by preliminary findings from the federally funded Creativity and Aging Study, suggesting that participating in an arts program may have health benefits for older people.

"We needed this kind of data desperately to prove what we've observed over the years," said Paula Terry, director of the NEA's AccessAbility office, which helps make the arts accessible to veterans, the elderly, the institutionalized and those with disabilities.

Leading the study was psychiatrist Gene Cohen, director of George Washington University's Center on Aging, Health & Humanities, who has studied creativity and aging for 30 years. In 2002, he and other researchers recruited 300 people, ages 65 to 103. Half were involved with arts programs including singing, creative writing, poetry, painting or jewelry making; half were not.

After two years, those in the arts group reported better overall physical health and fewer doctor visits than the others. They also reported fewer falls and better scores on depression and loneliness scales. Medication use increased with age in both groups, but the arts group went from using an average 6.1 drugs to seven drugs, while the control group went from using 5.7 drugs to 8.3. Cohen noted that arts programs also had a positive impact on maintaining elders' independence and appeared to reduce "risk factors that drive the need for long-term care."

How could drumming or collage-making translate into better health?

Neuroscientists unaffiliated with Cohen's study are exploring evidence that challenging mental activity such as artistic expression stimulates the growth of new brain cells in the cerebral cortex. Even as we age, said Roberto Cabeza, an associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at [Duke University](#), the creation of these new neuron networks continues.

Cohen theorizes that arts participants have a heightened sense of control and social engagement, both of which may boost the immune system. "Art," he says, "is accessible to all communities, and it's an activity that can be sustained."

[Bill Hamilton](#), 85, of Goodwin House Alexandria was among the participants in Cohen's study, along with other members of his retirement community's chorale. "We're the laboratory animals," he joked.

Hamilton had enjoyed group singing in high school but hadn't sung publicly in more than 40 years when, in 2001, he joined the new musical group. Singing, he said, has been "a pleasure and a rediscovery." Director Jeanne Kelly, who leads five senior choruses, said the groups give members "something to look forward to, something to excel in, something to be in command of."

Sometimes arts participation can be powerful therapy. Susan Perlstein, the founder of the National Center for Creative Aging and New York's nonprofit Elders Share the Arts, recalls a Holocaust survivor who sat watching her peers perform theater for a year before she told them how she escaped death more than 60 years earlier. The group turned her story into a play and made her the star.

"She said to the group . . . she felt for the first time she could feel at home," Perlstein said. "This process of being able to share your stories and transform them into art is actually a deeply healing process. She went from a depressed, sick older person to a lively young person. It was phenomenal to watch this change."

Other research suggests health benefits for older people involved with the arts:

⌘ A study published online in December by Columbia University's Research Center for Arts and Culture found that artists older than 65 had high levels of personal growth, autonomy and independence, all indicators of "successful aging." Parts of the study have been submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

⌘ A study published in 2004 in the Journal of Aging and Health found that 124 independent elders who took part in four weeks of theater training showed cognitive and psychological gains when compared with a control group.

⌘ An observational study published in 2005 in the American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias found that 12 people with dementia demonstrated significantly more engagement, pleasure, self-esteem and normalcy while participating in a painting program than they did during more-traditional adult day care activities.

Two groups cited by the NEA as exemplars in the field of the arts and aging are the [Liz Lerman](#) Dance Exchange in [Takoma Park](#) and AFTA. The dance troupe, a pioneer in intergenerational arts, has long included older people in its company.

AFTA has 18 artists, including Wolf, who lead 80 free workshops a month in 40 Washington area senior centers and nursing homes. "We've learned that after the programs, seniors were talking and smiling and socializing with one another more," said the group's executive director, Janine Tursini. "They were able to access memories and reminisce, which for people with cognitive impairments is a critical accomplishment." ⌘

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