Have You Tried These Creative Therapies for Alzheimer’s?

by ANGELA FINLAY

Why Creative Therapies for Alzheimer's Should Be in Every Treatment Plan

As Alzheimer’s disease chips away at cognitive function, it takes away a person’s past and future. Unable to recall words or think about what’s to come, their world shrinks and they become isolated.

A lot of therapy for Alzheimer's centers on strengthening cognitive ability, or assessing how quickly it’s declining. But by asking someone to remember a specific fact, or summon a certain memory, you may be setting them up to fail — and reminding them of everything they no longer know.

Many experts point out that creative or expressive therapies like art, music and dance help patients live in the present and tap into the abilities they *have* retained. Even if art can’t reverse the damage of Alzheimer’s, it can lead to better communication, more confidence, and ultimately, a better quality of life.

Artistic Appreciation and the Alzheimer’s Brain

As Alzheimer’s progresses, different areas of the brain begin to physically deteriorate. Memory is often the first to go, and eventually language and general cognition fails.

However, experts note that a “primal response” to creative communication — visual art, music or dance, for example — can remain after the other thought mechanisms have faltered.

Sensation Over Understanding

You could argue that art demands a close eye and thoughtful mind to be truly appreciated, but that might not be accurate. In fact, at its basic level, art seems to rely more on the senses than intellectual judgment — this is why so many people with dementia can access modes of expression quite easily, even if they can’t explain why.

Memory Retrieval

When memories are lost because of amnesia, dementia or another brain trauma, they may seem like they’re gone for good. However, art has been known to bridge the gap between current cognitive function and long-lost memories.

For instance, just as a specific scent can trigger a vivid recollection, music can inexplicably tap into deep emotions and memories.

How Creative Therapies for Alzheimer's Improve Prognosis

Alzheimer’s is a progressive disease, and although some treatment techniques may be able to slow the progress, there is no known way to stop it completely. However, art and music seem to draw from different areas of the

brain, re-routing communication pathways to bypass the areas that no longer function very well.

Aside from the sheer joy of an artistic endeavor and the satisfaction that comes with the completed piece, Alzheimer’s patients can enjoy other benefits, like:

A Nonverbal Connection

Everybody communicates non-verbally, but those nuances and gestures tend to take a back seat to verbal communication. In advanced cases of Alzheimer’s disease, when language is no longer a useful tool, expressive or creative therapies can encourage a non-verbal connection and serve as a crucial means of communication.

Two major goals of art therapy in advanced dementias are connection to others and increased sensory awareness. They may not be able to improve cognition or retrieve a range of memories, but through artistic expression patients can begin to connect and cooperate with their caregivers more than before. This is good for everyone involved.

Next page: finding the right creative therapy for Alzheimer's.

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Shift Focus to the Positive

Alzheimer’s is a limiting illness, so it’s easy to fixate on “lost” abilities and freedoms. But while it’s important to respect limitations, Alzheimer's caregivers can get stuck in a cycle of negativity, looking out for challenges without searching for natural solutions.

Expressive therapies are a win-win for both parties. Artistic expression brings more function and control to the Alzheimer’s patient: when there’s no pressure to describe or explain in words they can no longer find, patients will relax and become more receptive to the conversation and advice of others.

Finding the Right Creative Therapy

There’s no single right route to creative healing: art, music, dance (or movement) and drama are all possibilities. Some experts suggest that combining one or more will bring the most benefit, but some are more appropriate than others depending on the stage of Alzheimer’s, and of course, individual personality.

Returning to Personal Outlets

Many people have gravitated toward a certain mode of artistic expression at one point in life. For people in the earlier stages of Alzheimer’s, returning to that favored expression can be the most effective step to healthy release and better communication.

If you can, investigate the types of creative pursuits your loved one enjoyed earlier in their life. It might be worth trying a range of mediums at the outset to see which draws the most interest and attention.

Keep in mind that drawing and painting can be therapeutic, but since they also require a good deal of maneuverability, cognition and motor skills, they might not be the best outlets for advanced Alzheimer’s cases.

Advantages of Movement and Music

When someone has lost the ability to make sense of imagery, visual art might be out of the question, but music and dance are still viable options.

Dance or movement can be a powerful emotional release, and a visual way of representing feelings or attitudes. It

also taps into muscle memory, which can evoke happy, active times. The physical activity is a nice bonus.

Music may be even more useful as a creative therapy: rhythm and tones are felt deeply and can bring all sorts of thoughts, memories and emotions to the surface without much effort at all on the listener's part. Playing simple tunes could help, too, whether it's drumming a beat with the feet or singing.

Simplify the Connection

A professional movement therapy or music program is a great step, but it's not the only way to make use of creative expression for Alzheimer's therapy. If you're a caregiver or family member, tapping into your own creativity — even just a little spark — can be enough to connect and inspire.

If you're not sure where to start, why not take a class yourself? Connect with an art therapist or a counselor who's skilled in expressive therapy to learn a few new skills. You can start by contacting your local chapter of the Alzheimer' Association for info on available art therapy resources.

Finding a creative outlet can also help you care for yourself while you care for your loved one. It offers the chance to explore your own issues that may have been pushed away to make room for the challenge at hand. Whether or not you find an artistic passion, one thing is for sure: it will never hurt to try.