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## Creativity and Aging

Art making is a form of human development, at any age, and it works its agency through the shifting of what an individual perceives as possible. As long as there is possibility, there is hope; in its absence, there is only despair. The sense of the possibility, complexity, and essential mystery of the world is what keeps the soul engaged with reality. (Permuth, 2006, p. 23)

### Introduction

Although many older adults cope with challenges such as health conditions, economic insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, and grief and loss, aging can be a time of growth and fulfillment. A growing body of research demonstrates that engagement in the creative arts can enhance older adults' biopsychosocial well-being. The topic of creative aging has gained increased attention among practitioners and policymakers and is congruent with social work's strengths-based, person-in-environment perspective. Social workers play a valuable role in supporting creative expression as a form of communication and social engagement among older adults.

### The Growing Field of Creative Aging

Folklorists and creative arts therapy professionals have long recognized the role of the arts in enhancing health and well-being across the lifespan. In recent years, both interdisciplinary and public interest in the arts and aging has grown tremendously in the United States. Multiple local and national organizations dedicated to enhancing creative expression among older adults now exist. Choirs, dance companies, theatre troupes, writing workshops, visual art classes, and other creative outlets for older adults are increasing in number and popularity.

Hanna and Perlstein (2008), who helped lead a three-year national public awareness campaign to promote understanding of the relationship between creativity and aging, note that the "principle of lifelong learning underlies arts programs for older adults. Through creativity, the expertise gained with aging has the potential to offset the complications of aging" (p. 3). Recent research supports this statement. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) sponsored a national longitudinal study to determine how participation in professionally conducted, community-based, participatory arts programs

## Statistics

- A 2008 NEA survey of public participation in the arts found that educational background and gender influenced arts participation more than age. — Stern, 2011
- The New Horizons International Music Association includes almost 200 bands, orchestras, choirs, and other ensembles.
- The oldest senior theater company in the U.S., Stagebridge, began as an acting class in a senior center in 1978.
- Recent surveys conducted jointly by the Society for Arts in Healthcare, the Joint Commission, and Americans for the Arts found that nearly half of all health care institutions in the U.S. reported having arts in health care programs. — Society for the Arts in Healthcare, 2009
- Aging professional artists living in New York City and Los Angeles report taking more creative risks than they did when they were younger and continue to pursue professional training—despite the fact that almost half have experienced age-related discrimination in their work. — Jeffri, 2011



(such as dance, drama, music, and literary and visual arts) affected the health and well-being of older adults. This multisite *Creativity and Aging Study*—which was cosponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the National Institute of Mental Health, among others—found that participants in the arts programs fared better than did individuals in the control groups. Specifically, participants reported better physical health (fewer falls, fewer medical appointments, and less medication usage), better mental health (less loneliness and enhanced morale), and increased involvement in activities, as compared to their counterparts (Cohen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006; George Washington University, 2006). Several factors help explain the link between creative expression and healthy aging: a sense of mastery (which, in turn, enhances the immune system); social engagement, with its concurrent physical and psychosocial benefits; and brain plasticity, or the brain's ability to change and grow (Cohen, 2006).

Building on the success of the *Creativity and Aging Study*, in 2008 the MetLife Foundation launched its Creative Aging Program in cooperation with the National Guild for Community Arts Education (then the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts). The program provides technical assistance and funding to help Guild member organizations design, implement, and evaluate skills-based participatory arts programs for adults aged 60 years and older. During the pilot year, older adults in eight states reported statistically significant improvements in mood (as well as decreased loneliness and increased social engagement) after participating in three-month

visual arts, music, and dance programs (National Guild for Community Arts Education [National Guild], n.d.). Moreover, staff of the nine grantee organizations reported that participation in the Creative Aging Program increased their awareness of both older adults' needs and aging resources (National Guild, n.d.)—thus enhancing the likelihood of continued creative aging programs in their communities. Twelve organizations in eight states were selected to participate in the Creative Aging Program in 2011 (National Guild, 2011).

The following research also illustrates the benefits of creativity for older adults:

- Use of acting techniques improves comprehension, memory, problem-solving skills, and quality of life in older adults (Noice & Noice, as cited in Arditti & Skirble, 2006; Noice & Noice, as cited in Silver, 2011). Improvisational theater enhances quality of life and “feelings of success and empowerment” for people in the early to mid stages of Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders (Northwestern University, 2011, para. 5).
- Tango dancing enhances older adults’ biopsychosocial well-being (McKinley, as cited in McGill University, 2005) and improves physical symptoms and quality of life for people with Parkinson’s disease (a condition that tends to be diagnosed in adults 50 years or older) (Hackney & Earhart, 2009, 2010).
- Participation in visual art and group storytelling programs increases social engagement and cognitive function for individuals living with dementia (Agency for

Healthcare Research and Quality, 2011; Fritsch et al., 2009; Kinney & Rentz, as cited in Davis Basting, 2006). Furthermore, evidence exists that some types of dementia and other neurological disorders may even *enhance* visual creativity (Miller, 2007).

- Creative expression through dance, music, visual arts, and writing fosters resilience in older adult survivors of the Holocaust and strengthens links with younger generations (Corley, 2010).
- Professional artists remain engaged and productive as they age (Jeffri, 2007, 2011), and “artists who remain creatively engaged in later life also show flexibility in thinking and psychological adaptability to degenerative [physical] challenges” (Braverman Schmidt, 2006, p. 29).

These studies exemplify ways in which creative expression enhances older adults’ physical, psychosocial, and spiritual well-being. Furthermore, the growth of creative aging research and programs has been paralleled by the emergence of creative aging in the policy arena. The NEA convened a White House Mini-Conference on Creativity and Aging in May 2005 (Misey Boyer, 2005), leading to inclusion of the topic of arts participation at the December 2005 White House Conference on Aging (Blanchard, 2006; Hanna & Perlstein, 2008).

### Implications for Social Work Practice

Both social work and the arts operate on multiple levels—clinical, group, community, and political—and value cultural expression and diversity (Gutiérrez & Creekmore, 2008). Both disciplines also foster intergenerational relationships (Hooyma, 2006; Larson, 2006). A recent study identified four intersections between social work and the arts:

(a) The arts and social work aim to emotionally, physically, and spiritually move us and be moved in the world; (b) both depend on the construction of language, expression, and communication; (c) the arts enhance personal and professional self-reflection; (d) the arts transcend social work knowledge dichotomies and provide an integrated model for social work body-mind-spirit connection in a social context. (Damianakis, 2007, p. 529)

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the arts have been linked historically with social work practice (Gutiérrez & Creekmore, 2008) and that the emerging field of creative aging includes social workers. Hanna and Perlstein (2008) assert that “a new paradigm that articulates the idea of seeing older people for their potential rather than their problems defines the emerging field of creative aging” (p. 2). This paradigm aligns closely with the strengths perspective of the social work profession (Blundo, 2008; Kim, 2008). Social workers can promote older adults’ engagement with the creative arts in multiple ways:

#### Identify local resources that promote creative aging.

Sites that may sponsor or host creative arts programs, classes, and other opportunities for older adults include public school systems, higher education institutions, lifelong learning centers, community arts schools, performing arts centers, local arts councils, parks and recreation centers, community and cultural centers, public libraries, aging and intergenerational organizations, senior centers, residential communities for older adults, health care organizations, and religious congregations (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Although some older adults may not wish to participate in age-specific programs, others may welcome the opportunity to develop skills alongside their peers. Moreover, some arts and aging programs may provide opportunities to develop intergenerational relationships.

#### Be attuned to the forms of creative expression—past and current—that energize each older adult.

Client references to dancing with a spouse or partner, acting in a high school play, or writing poetry can provide clues to fulfilling forms of creative self-expression and social engagement. Enjoyment of the arts need not be limited to participation in structured classes, programs, or organizations or even firsthand experience, however. Commenting on a client’s habit of singing along with the radio, enthusiasm regarding a grandchild’s drawing talent, or excitement about the premiere of a local play can open the door to a conversation about activities that individual finds meaningful. Discussing an older adult’s experiences with the arts can facilitate not only life review and reminiscence but also reflection on the person’s

Participation in tango classes improved balance, posture, motor coordination, and cognition more than did walking among older adults who had experienced a fall within the year preceding the study (McKinley, as cited in McGill University, 2005).

Two studies by the Research Center for Arts and Culture found that aging professional artists reported high levels of life satisfaction, high self-esteem, and strong social networks (Jeffri, 2007, 2011). The study participants continue to create art and participate in the arts community as they age.

current circumstances and future goals or concerns.

**Support older adults' participation in creative arts activities.** With their person-in-environment perspective, social workers are well equipped both to help older adults identify the ways in which the arts enhance their lives and to explore avenues for creative expression. Some older adults may prefer to engage in arts activities on an individual basis. Others may benefit from participating in community-based creative arts programs—such as choirs, orchestras, writing groups, quilting circles, or improvisational theater troupes. (Many programs welcome participants of all experience and ability levels.) Yet other older adults may enjoy taking classes or one-on-one lessons in a creative art they have done in the past or have wanted to learn. Some individuals may even wish to teach a class or start a program of their own. Social work knowledge of community resources, such as transportation and adaptive equipment, can also facilitate older adults' participation in creative arts activities.

**Collaborate with creative arts therapists and activities professionals.** Thanks to the growth of art, dance, music, poetry, and dance/movement therapy, an increasing number of professionals trained in the use of the arts as therapeutic modalities are available to support older adults. Some, similar to social workers, even specialize in aging. The settings in which creative arts therapists work include health care and behavioral health organizations, nursing homes, home- and community-based settings, educational institutions, and private practice. Social workers serve as valuable links to these professionals, who may—in turn—facilitate referrals to social work. With appropriate safeguards for client confidentiality and privacy, the two professions can exchange biopsychosocial information that may enhance assessment, intervention, and outcomes. Some social workers have even created collaborative programs with their creative arts therapy colleagues—such as a drop-in group cofacilitated by a social worker, art therapist, music therapist, and dance/movement therapist on a short-term rehabilitation unit (Froman, Petrich, & Kocher, 2010). Activities professionals (who work in health care settings, senior centers and adult day programs, assisted living communities and

nursing homes, and other settings) also incorporate the arts in their work with older adults and are natural collaborative partners for social workers. Similar to creative arts therapists, these professionals are often adept at tailoring arts activities to the cognitive, physical, and psychosocial abilities of older adults.

**Develop new arts and aging programs in partnership with arts organizations and professional teaching artists.** Although the field of creative aging is growing rapidly, arts and aging programs do not yet exist in many communities. The *Arts and Aging Toolkit* (National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, 2007), available online in English and Spanish at no cost, provides detailed guidance regarding how to enhance, design, promote, implement, and evaluate participatory, skill-based arts and aging programs. Furthermore, a number of nationally recognized programs can serve as models.

**Seek and develop continuing education opportunities addressing creative aging.** The National Center for Creative Aging, which helped create the *Arts and Aging Toolkit*, regularly hosts webinars and symposia. Other programs focusing on creativity and aging are available at geriatric education centers (see, for example, Washington DC Area Geriatric Education Center Consortium, n.d.), colleges and universities (such as the Shepherd University School of Social Work [Owens, 2010]), and national organizations, such as the American Society on Aging and the National Council on Aging. Other potential sites for creative aging programs include continuing education programs affiliated with schools of social work, aging and social service organizations, and arts organizations.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, creative aging has emerged as a dynamic interdisciplinary field. Participation in the arts offers a vital avenue of self-expression and social engagement for older adults, and a growing body of evidence supports the biopsychosocial benefits of participatory arts and aging programs. Creative aging complements social work, and social workers can play an integral role in supporting creative expression among older adults.

## Arts Programs for Individuals with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders

- Participants in the TimeSlips Creative Storytelling Project decreased confusion; enhanced participant alertness, communication, and social engagement; and improved nursing home staff interactions with and perceptions of residents with dementia (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2011; Fritsch et al., 2009).
- Participants in the Memories in the Making® program create drawings or paintings with the support of trained art facilitators, who convey each artist's verbal interpretation to family members and other care providers.
- Participants in the Memory Ensemble™, cofacilitated by the Lookingglass Theatre Company and researchers from Northwestern University, learn to create improvisational theater (Hill, 2011; Northwestern University, 2011).

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With their person-  
in-environment  
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identify the ways in  
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enhance their lives  
and to explore  
avenues for creative  
expression.



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## Resources

### **American Society on Aging**

2006 journal issue on arts and aging; archived webinars on creativity and aging; MindAlert lecture monographs. [www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org)

### **Americans for the Arts**

Advocacy, research, professional development. [www.artsusa.org](http://www.artsusa.org)

### **ArtAge Senior Theatre Resource Center**

Repertoire, information, technical assistance. [www.seniortheatre.com](http://www.seniortheatre.com)

### **Center on Age and Community**

National base for TimeSlips Creative Storytelling Project; research on the arts and dementia. [www.ageandcommunity.org](http://www.ageandcommunity.org)

### **Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at the George Washington University Health Sciences**

Research on creativity and aging. [www.gwumc.edu/cahh](http://www.gwumc.edu/cahh)

### **Generations United**

Public policy; National Center on Intergenerational Shared Sites; research. [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)

### **Memories in the Making®**

Professionally facilitated visual art program, created by the Alzheimer's Association, for people with Alzheimer's disease; directory of participating

chapters; educational resources and training. [www.thememoriesinthemaking.com](http://www.thememoriesinthemaking.com)

### **National Center for Creative Aging**

*Arts and Aging Toolkit*; clearinghouse for arts and aging programs and information; educational programs and e-newsletter; research and policy support; technical assistance. [www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org)

### **National Council on Aging**

Archived webinars on arts and aging. [www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)

### **National Endowment for the Arts**

Arts and Aging Resource List. [www.arts.gov/resources/accessibility/rlists/ArtsAging.html](http://www.arts.gov/resources/accessibility/rlists/ArtsAging.html)

### **National Guild for Community Arts Education**

*Arts and Aging Toolkit*; MetLife Foundation Creative Aging Initiative; advocacy; information and research; professional development. [www.nationalguild.org](http://www.nationalguild.org)

### **New Horizons International Music Association**

International network of music programs for older adults. [www.newhorizonsmusic.org](http://www.newhorizonsmusic.org)

### **Oasis Institute**

National network of lifelong learning programs. [www.oasisnet.org](http://www.oasisnet.org)

### **Osher Lifelong Learning Institute**

National Resource Network and site locator. <http://usm.maine.edu/olli/national/about.jsp>

### **Research Center on Arts and Culture**

<http://arts.tc.columbia.edu/rcac/>

### **Society for the Arts in Healthcare**

Webinars, toolbox, grant opportunities. [www.thesah.org](http://www.thesah.org)

### **Stagebridge Senior Theatre Company**

Senior theatre productions; acting classes for older adults; intergenerational storytelling programs; newsletter and other resources. [www.stagebridge.org](http://www.stagebridge.org)

### **Creative Arts Therapies Associations**

American Art Therapy Association: [www.americanarttherapyassociation.org](http://www.americanarttherapyassociation.org)

American Dance Therapy Association: [www.adta.org](http://www.adta.org)

American Music Therapy Association: [www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org)

National Association for Drama Therapy: [www.nadt.org](http://www.nadt.org)

National Association for Poetry Therapy: [www.poetrytherapy.org](http://www.poetrytherapy.org)

Participation in the arts offers a vital avenue of self-expression and social engagement for older adults, and a growing body of evidence supports the biopsychosocial benefits of participatory arts and aging programs.

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