The Effects of Art Therapy on Those Suffering Alzheimer’s

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BRIEF ABSTRACT

Several studies from past to current have proven that art, in any creative modality, can affect individuals in positive ways by generating both physiological and psychological health. Encouraging and engaging with your creative selves enhances the quality of life and overall natures the well-being of individuals. The quality of life, however, may be lost for those who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease, a form of dementia. They need to be valued not just for what they have done in their past, but also for the life they are living now. Despite the symptoms of this disease, the capacity of older people to be and remain creative throughout their lives is acknowledged through recent studies. This is true providing they have the opportunity to release and exercise their creativity. Trials, case studies and research have suggested that art therapy can improve neuropsychiatric symptoms, improve depression, engage attention, encourage socialization among other benefits. We will be exploring the effects of art therapy with patients who have Alzheimer’s by reviewing current literature.

Alzheimer’s Disease

- Alzheimer’s disease is a form of dementia that affects 5.4 million Americans of all ages (1). Globally, 36 million people are estimated to have Alzheimer’s disease.
- The number grows every year at the size and population of individuals 65 and older continue to increase.
- By 2030, the number go people 65 and older with this disease is estimated to reach 71.8 million a 40% increase. By 2050, it is estimated that 138.5 million individuals 65 and older will have Alzheimer’s.
- Globally it is expected to double by 2030 to 66 million and more than trip in 2050 (115 million people).
- Alzheimer’s is a neurological disorder that was first described in 1906.
- The death of brain cells continue to die out on life’s expectancy.
- Alzheimer’s disease grows and takes over the cerebral cortex, emotional control fades, language is impaired, and lack of discernment. The death of these brain cells cause a lost sense of direction and an increase in age.
- In the final stages of Alzheimer’s individuals lose their ability to speak, feed themselves, control their bladder and bowel movements, lose memory altogether, and not be able to recognize people.
- This disease, on average, lasts 8-10 years after diagnosis but can also up to 20 years.
- There is no known definite cure or cause of Alzheimer’s disease. There are medications available to help alleviate few symptoms that Alzheimer’s has.
- A recent discovery by an MIT student (2) suggest that information does get stored in the memory cells of an individual who suffers from dementia, but it isn’t accessed (3). Art therapy, however, has been proven to retrieve these memories that have been registered in an individual’s brain. Lost memories can be found.
- Art Therapy with Alzheimer’s
  - The imagination and creativity for those who are diagnosed with the disease will continue to flourish. As the disease takes and, an art therapist can help the individual to remain engaged in their identity.
- Benefits of art therapy with individuals who have Alzheimer’s were discussed at a conference by America’s leading researchers in creativity and dementia (2).
  - Positive emotional responses
  - Reduction in agitation
  - Greater social engagement/interaction
  - Change in cognitive processes
  - Increased verbal fluency
  - Well being
  - Increased mobility
  - Greater physical strength and balance Improved mood and attention span
  - Loss stress (caregivers and receivers alike) Elevated quality of life
  - Greater understanding of the human condition

With the information gained through research, it’s acknowledged art therapy is very useful for people who have this disease. The following structure of art therapy with Alzheimer’s may be useful to understand why:
  - A safe and nurturing space is created for the individual or group
  - The therapist takes into the client and uses a unique approach for each individual, acknowledging there are different stages of Alzheimer’s.
  - Art therapy strengthens preserved abilities.
  - Art therapy focuses on enhancing memory.
  - Art therapy focuses on using specific, meaningful, neurologically pathways in different ways. It allows them to express, contribute, and interact.
  - The act of creating can transfer an individual to enter a “state of flow.”

State of Flow

Alzheimer’s disease causes dysfunction in emotional processing but basic emotional processing, expression and reward still function until further into the final stages of the disease.

Procedureal learning and memories are preserved in Alzheimer’s disease. Individuals have the ability to learn, suggesting they can learn creative skills as well.

The creation of art can have a person reach a “state of flow.” The state of flow, as it’s discover Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains, allows a person to feel strong, alert, in control, self-enhanced, and uses the peak of their abilities. It is active when an individual is completely absorbed in an activity, especially restoring their creativity. Art therapy meets the steps in which to one would need to take to achieve “flow.”

- Have a clear goal
- Immediate feedback is given
- There is a balance between skill and challenge level

Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow sheds light on the importance of matching a challenge with abilities.

Art therapist design a project that is tailored to their client’s needs and abilities—challenging them at the right level.

Water color, 3-D media such as clay, collage oil paints, and sand art are among the types of media that are used. Sensory heavy materials are encouraged.

Cathy Moore and Csikszentmihalyi believed in the process and environment (3, 5). Both, though one speaks of the art therapy process and the other of achieving a stronger, happier self believe that the process cannot be forced and not to focus on the end result.

Programs

Listed are a few programs that use art therapy to help people with Alzheimer’s disease.

Memories in the Making
  - 70 stables held in residential and adult day service programs in: Santa Clara, San Mateo, San Francisco and Contra Costa Counties. pieces are exhibited, turned into calendars, and used.
  - A study was done in which 12 individuals were observed while engaging in Memories in the Making. The well-being of these individuals were compared to the well-being of the same participants in traditional adult day center activities (3).
  - Results showed that the individuals had enhanced their self-esteem, engaged more, sustained attention, and shown signs of pleasure more during the Memories in the Making experience (5).

Meet Me at MoMA
  - Trained educators teach and discuss with a group who has Alzheimer’s and their care takers
  - A research study that used a variety of measures to gather qualitative and quantitative information through, observation rated scales, self-evaluating scales, and take-home scales. This was used to understand how Meet Me at MoMA impacts the well-being of individuals with Alzheimer’s (4).
  - Elevated mood, enhanced self-esteem, more responsive to their environment, positive interactions, and increased socialization are among the benefits this research study has found (4).

Conclusion

The discovery that the memories that are lost can be retrieved, the research that exposed how art therapy enhances the quality of life and one’s spirituality, and that a state of flow may be achieved through the process, are all outstanding advances in understanding this disease. The studies done with art therapy with Alzheimer’s are limited and more are done with early to mid stage Alzheimer’s. More research needs to be conducted with those who are living in the final stages of Alzheimer’s. Also, more evidence on if art therapy should be a continued throughout their stage is necessary. People who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease are still living and still have an identity to hold on to. Art therapy can help them find their spirituality, identify and desire to live life to the fullest.

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- Alzheimer’s is a neurological disorder that was first described in 1906.
- The death of brain cells continue to die out through our life expectancy.
- The brain cells begin to shrink and is left with fewer brain cells and as the disease grows and takes over the cerebral cortex, emotional control fades, language is impaired, and lack of discernment. The death of these brain cells cause a lost sense of direction and an increase in anger.
- In the final stages of Alzheimer’s individuals lose their ability to speak, feed themselves, control their bladder and bowels, movements, lose memory almost entirely, and not be able to recognize people.
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