

## Art Helping Living with Alzheimer's

A very effective way of stimulating the brain is visiting your local museums and experiencing all forms of art.

From the moment we are born, we start altering our brain cells by learning information. Every new thing we learn through our senses, from faces we see to skills we develop, gets processed and stored by the brain. Neurons, the cells in the brain, grow, physically changing their shapes to connect to other cells for cataloging, organizing, storing and later retrieving all this information. Cells connections interrelate, wiring a complex system of highways for processing information called neuropathways.

Amyloid plaques and tangles associated with Alzheimer's disease disrupt the neuropathways created over a lifetime of learning experiences, making it difficult for the brain to organize and utilize information. Symptoms are noticed in the form of short-term memory loss, problems with word finding and difficulties performing familiar tasks.

Brain activity, however, does not stop here. Actually, the brain reacts by creating new pathways, searching and finding new and creative ways to compensate for the losses caused by the disease. Information that may be lost today may be retrieved tomorrow when a new pathway in the brain is found. Caregivers may



notice this process and describe it as "good" and "bad" days.

The brain is under attack by the plaques and tangles. The brain fights back, creating new pathways. The more help you can give your brain in this fight, the stronger it will be against the onset of dementia and the better you will be in the long run.

That is why it is so important to participate in activities that nurture the formation of new brain connections. Exposure to art should be considered a powerful brain enhancer activity, especially for those in the early stages of the disease.

The same disease process that makes it difficult for the brain to organize information also releases its creativity. People with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and dementia are highly creative, often capable of deeply intuitive and inspir-

ing interpretations of their surroundings. They also experience an enhanced, sometimes uncanny, ability for visual observation, capturing a multitude of details commonly missed by most "sound" brains.

Participation in activities involving art further stimulates the already enhanced creativity and observation skills, promoting the formation of healthy neuropathways connecting memories, visual-spatial and language abilities.

Exposure to environments promoting creativity also enhances dopamine pathways of the limbic system, generating lasting feelings of wellbeing and self worth – feelings so precious to those living with dementia and their loved ones.

alzheimer's association®

California Central Coast Chapter

**Santa Barbara County**  
1528 Chapala St., #204  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101  
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113  
Santa Maria, CA 93454  
Tel: 805.636.6432

**San Luis Obispo County**  
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401  
Tel: 805.547.3830

**Ventura County**  
2580 E. Main St Suite 201  
Ventura, CA 93003  
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:  
**800.272.3900**

alz.org/CaCentral

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## Caregiver Tips

💡 Although we live in a city rich in cultural venues, we forget to utilize these resources.

Here are some venues that are not only fun to visit but can also help enhance cognitive abilities:

### The Botanic Gardens

1212 Mission Canyon Road  
805-682-4726  
Open daily  
9 a.m. - 6 p.m.  
Adults: \$8; Seniors: \$6

### Santa Barbara Museum of Art

1130 State St.  
805-963-4364  
Open Tuesday through Sunday 11 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Monday closed.  
Adults \$9; Seniors \$7

### Museum of Natural History

2559 Puesta del Sol Road  
805-682-4711  
Open daily  
10 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Adults \$10; Seniors \$7

### Santa Barbara Maritime Museum

113 Harbor Way  
Santa Barbara, CA  
805-962-8404  
Open Thursdays through Tuesdays  
10 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Adults \$7; Seniors \$4

### Santa Barbara Zoo

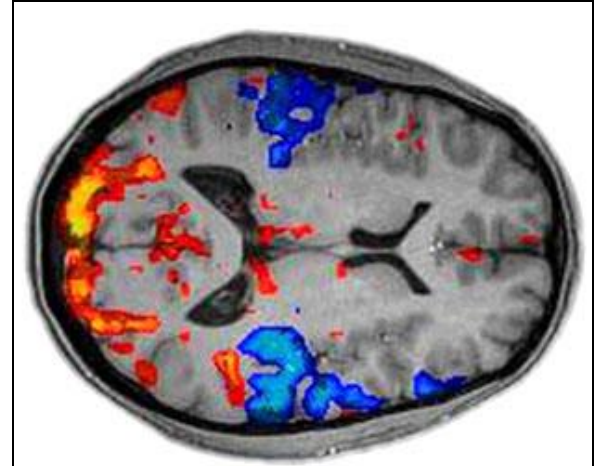
500 Ninos Dr.  
805-963-5695  
Open daily  
10 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Adults \$12; Seniors \$10

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Scientists in the field of cognitive neurosciences (the study of human cognition), with the use of tools like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), are only now beginning to understand how art therapy works. There is no doubt, however, that the perception and cognition of art has a positive effect psychologically and emotionally, precisely because it affects the wiring in the brain.

Until a proven treatment that delays or cures Alzheimer's disease is found, patients must use all available methods to stimulate brain activity and enhance cognition. So consider adding a weekly trip to a local art museum or joining an art group to your strategy in fighting Alzheimer's disease. Your brain will benefit from the extra stimulation and you will feel the benefits translated into fewer "bad days" and more "good days." And this may be just the edge your brain needs to keep thriving, even when confronted with this disease.

*Written by Luciana Cramer, Care Consultant, Alzheimer's Association California Central Chapter.*



fMRI is based on the same technology as **magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)** -- a noninvasive test that uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to create detailed images of the body. But instead of creating images of organs and tissues, fMRI looks at blood flow in the brain to detect areas of activity. These changes in blood flow, which are captured on a computer, help doctors understand more about how the brain works.



## Helpful Resources:

**Book: Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience**, Noah Hass-Cohen

**Book: Connecting Through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers**, Robin Rio

**App: Line Art+** - Create your own art as particles respond to your touch and leave colorful lines (\$1.99)

**App: Art+** - Lookup artwork and gallery information available for all paintings, sculptures and forms of art. (\$0.99)

**CFIT - Cognitive Fitness & Innovative Therapies**, a program of the Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, [SBCFIT.org](http://SBCFIT.org)

## Six out of 10 people with Alzheimer's will wander

You can't know when it will happen, but you'll know what to do when it does.

**MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®** is a 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer's or related dementia who wander or have a medical emergency. We provide 24-hour assistance, no matter when or where the person is reported missing.

Sign up today: **1.888.572.8566** [medicalert.org/safereturn](http://medicalert.org/safereturn)