

The Image Is Beautiful; Connecting Through Art

By Marcy Maler, Program Manager

Studies show that the creation of art can enhance communication, brain function, and social interaction for people living with dementia. In fact, creating visual art can trigger dormant memories and emotions, inspiring conversation among these patients who normally struggle to express themselves. Further, when a person living with memory loss creates an artwork it stimulates the entire brain as she plans, remembers, creates patterns, and uses motor skills.

Creative techniques like drawing, painting, sculpting, or coloring as a form of self-expression can bring relief from the overwhelming emotions associated with memory loss. Roadblocks to verbal communication laid by dementia are bypassed through the artistic process, and a loved one can find a nonverbal way to express himself through the art. With a little help from you he can be encouraged to share nonverbal messages and symbols that can be found in his art. In addition, concentration and attention improves, and difficult behaviors associated with a diagnosis of dementia are often easier to mitigate even after the artistic activity is over.

Not only is a diagnosis of dementia stressful, but in some cases residential changes may be required and a loved one may have to be moved from her family home to a residential facility. She will certainly feel the loss of friends and family. Providing a means for artistic expression is an opportunity to work through that anxiety. Studies have found that art has a positive effect on health and illness; it helps individuals to relax, gives them a sense of control, reduces depression and anxiety, and even increases self-esteem. The relaxing nature of producing art can help manage stress while giving your loved one a creative outlet and may perhaps unlock some of



her hidden talents.

As dementia progresses, your loved one may no longer be able to write or use language to communicate, but he may be able to use colors or reveal images of his past. This form of expression can result in your loved one's ability to connect to family members and help him feel empowered and less isolated.

The artistic expression not only helps your loved one communicate, but it will boost her brain health. Creative abilities are one of the last cognitive impairments to be affected by dementia. Her brain will respond well to art as it strengthens communication between the two brain hemispheres.

Art is proven to be one of the powerful tools for stimulating the brain. Because creative activity stimulates a different part of the brain, it can help stimulate more positive feelings and stirs memories. She will find it easier to express emotions through art and may paint images of memories that she otherwise struggles to express. Be sure to ask questions about the representations: where the house is, who the people depicted are; the choices of colors (was the house blue? or is it blue because that is his favorite color); and the feelings associated with the depictions. Show your interest and your encouragement. The quality of the piece is of no consequence.

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