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Art as Medicine: Maintaining Brain Health



Photo by: JIUN-JE LIN: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/elderly-person-during-drawing-therapy-4566528/>

1..2..3..., within those three seconds someone in the world has just developed dementia. Beth Holiday is the name of one of those people around the world who suffers with the disease. When she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she turned to music therapy at the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health. There she would participate in 90-minute sessions of music listening. Beth found that music helped her regain memories and emotions that the disease had

begun to take away. More than just emotional support, those sessions played a critical role in maintaining her cognitive function. As Beth herself puts it, “We all have (cognitive) issues, and music sort of draws us together... You don’t feel alone and dwell on our (problems).”

Her story along with many other similar ones continue to support the new research on maintaining brain health. This new research suggests that everyday activities which include listening to music, painting, and even playing board games may work to preserve brain function and possibly reduce cognitive decline. By learning about dementia, the stories of those who deal with it, and what has helped them, is crucial when wishing to slow down or protect against cognitive decline within our loved ones, friends, or even ourselves. With research continuing to grow and be supported it is both clear and critical to engage in creative activities in hopes of protecting against cognitive decline.

Susan Magsamen, the author of the article “Neuroaesthetics Reveals How the Arts Help with Dementia and Trauma”, supports the idea that art not only serves to help emotional well-being but is also a factor in slowing down cognitive decline. By introducing the study of Neuroaesthetics which refers to how artistic expression can have a profound effect on the brain, especially those who suffer with cognitive impairments. Magsamen emphasizes how artistic expression is deeply embedded in our lives, ultimately reinforcing the idea that neuroaesthetics and creative therapies can help people with a wide range of conditions by improving neural connectivity and reducing stress. As the writer acknowledges that neurological conditions are among the leading causes of poor health and disability in the United States. Her argument emphasizes the newly researched theory that activities like the arts can help reduce the risk of neurological conditions.

This is also argued in The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) article “Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly”. The journal presents the Bronx Aging study which analyzes the relationship between activities like reading, writing, and board game playing with reduced risk for dementia. With the use of charts and their conducted research it is evident that intellectual stimulation by activities like dancing, board games, have a clear and strong correlation with protecting against cognitive decline.

Lastly, the source “Music and Dementia: An Overview,” by Ronald Devere reintroduces music and its therapeutic value. As music is able to activate areas of memory and the brain. The article focuses on the Bronx Aging study which tracked 469 older adults over a period of time. By the end of the study, the discovery that regular engagement in such activities was found to be protective against dementia. The author is supported as they argue that brain exercise can ward off or decrease the chances of cognitive impairment, while embracing the idea that their research sets up correlation, not cause.

Multiple studies have established that social and creative pursuits such as painting, dancing, and music therapy are not only leisure activities but also essential tools in maintaining brain health and slowing the advancement of cognitive decline. Although research continues to be supported by different studies and the use of people sharing their stories. These demonstrated beneficial impacts are commonly neglected as components of eldercare and are inaccessible to many who need them most.

As a society who works towards prioritizing cognitive well-being, we need to fight to have these activities accessible to the elderly whether it is at a care facility, community club, or everyday life. Not only that but personal improvements such as encouraging a loved one to incorporate artistic or leisure activities into their and our own lives are all tiny steps that will

make a great impact as we age. Maintaining brain health is not just an individual task, sharing and educating others allows us to foster a better quality of life for oneself, our families, and generations to come.

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