

Creative Aging and the State of Aging in Utah Literature Review

A Portion of the Proposal for an Integrated Service Project

Gina Allyn

Community Engaged Scholars, Bennion Center, University of Utah

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Abstract

As the number of older adults in the United States increases dramatically, there is a need to also increase the number of opportunities for them to challenge and grow their minds in order to maintain mental and physical health and happiness. Creative aging programs are designed to help the elderly reinforce their natural defenses against dementia and other problems associated with the stagnation that accompanies age. In Utah, there are few creative aging programs, and there is a growing need for them as our elderly population rises.

Introduction

The best Alzheimer's disease treatment is not a new miracle drug or complex therapy. It is dance. According to Verghese et al. (2003), participation in dance programs reduces the rate of development of dementia and Alzheimer's by 75%. There is no drug on the market today, or even on the horizon, which comes close to that figure. Dance is an example of creative aging.

“There is no denying the problems that accompany aging. But what has been universally denied is the potential. The ultimate expression of potential is creativity.” -Dr. Gene Cohen, father of the creative aging field, from his book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*. Creative aging addresses the lack of creative opportunities for adults to grow and maintain physical and mental function during later years of life. It is a relatively new field, kick started by Dr. Cohen, in which professionals in gerontology, social work, education and the arts have come together to develop the theory and practice of creative work with elders. In 2005 the National Center for Creative Aging was established, dedicated, according to Patterson and Perlstein (2011), “to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging, and to unite research, practice, and policy” (p. 29).

Creative aging programs are modeled after college courses, with professional teachers. They happen for free and where the older adults live or spend their time, such as a nursing home or senior center. Creative aging changes the way people think about aging, by transforming senior communities into places of learning, creativity, and wellness. Creativity is the ability to create something new that is valued, whether that is a tangible art piece, or an abstract idea. Creative aging is the participation of older adults in activities that stimulate their creativity, and has the potential to transform the experience of old age in the United States.

Creative aging programs fall into one of three categories: “Well” (i.e. for a senior center), “Frail” (adults with dementia), or “Intergenerational” (a program which brings together younger people from the community with the older adults).

Types of arts programs include: Readers Theatre (reading of theatre pieces), Time Slips (improvisational storytelling), Dance Heart (dance for frail elders), Meet me at MOMA (museum art outreach for patients with dementia), Opening Minds through Art (an abstract art program for nursing homes with student volunteers), and even more.

Literature Review

Community Need

There are four main community needs that creative aging programs can address. First, the number of seniors in the United States is growing rapidly and with it comes the need for age-friendly communities. In 2001 the life-expectancy at birth was 77.2 years and is even higher today, as reported by Flood and Scharer (2006). According to Dahlberg (2011) every 7.7 seconds, one of the 77 million baby boomers turns 60. Perlstein (n.d.) estimates that by the year 2030, 28% of the population will be over 60, while the number over 85 will triple. According to the Utah Foundation Research Report No. 733, Utah's senior population will constitute 13% of the state by 2030. Simply disengaging from society after a retirement is no longer an option with such time left. There is no reason age should prevent living life to the fullest; as Patterson and Perlstein (2011) wrote, "Growing old need not be a time of diminished expectation" (p. 35). It was concluded at the Summit on Creativity and Aging in America, reviewed by Hanna (2016), "There is a need for a cultural change to combat ageism and call attention to the health and wellness benefits of lifelong arts learning and age-friendly design" (p. 7).

Second, Utah has the highest rate of Alzheimer's disease in the country. Although drugs can help alleviate some psychotic symptoms there are other coping problems that accompany the disease that drugs cannot tackle. Nonmedical interventions that highlight the patient's strengths and bring satisfaction to the patient must also be established, as declared by Cohen (2002).

Third, there are not enough opportunities for older adults' creative learning in Utah. While creative aging programs are growing in popularity on the coasts of the country, they are scarce in the central U.S., including Utah, and there is not much of a plan to address the issue. According to Utah Foundation Research Report No. 733:

There is no long-term strategic plan for the growing population of seniors in Utah. In 2005 the University of Utah's Center for Public Policy and Administration published "The Utah Aging Initiative" that discussed projected demographics and the impact of the so-called "senior boom." That same year the Utah Legislature created the Commission on Aging to increase understanding of the needs of Utah's aging population. In 2006, Governor Jon Huntsman initiated the Utah 2030 project to encourage state agencies to design plans to address the best ways of serving the growing senior population, but no programs were implemented as a result. Since then, there has been no comprehensive state-wide analysis of the issue. (p. 2-3)

Lastly, more jobs requiring artistic skills are needed to employ fine arts graduates. There are too many students graduating with fine arts degrees being taught that there are only a few career options available to them. There are many other ways creative skills can be utilized and creative aging is one of them.

Neuroscience and Psychology of Creative Aging

According to Dr. Peter Davies of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, 65-70% of people do not get Alzheimer's, which means the brain is put together in such a way to protect itself and resist the disease. Creativity is the brain's natural means of growing and defending disease. The goal of treating dementia should be to stimulate that self-protection mechanism.

The more we do, the more vibrant the brain. The brain's ability to adapt and grow is called its "plasticity." Creative aging works to promote the brain's plasticity by giving it what it wants: challenge. According to Perlstein (n.d) there is actually an increase in number and length of neuron branches in the higher intellectual functioning parts of the brain between the ages of early 50s and late 70s. In order to maintain those connections

and create new ones, however, the brain must be challenged. Therefore, it is not age itself that causes the decline of mental processing, but inactivity that endangers the brain. This inactivity occurs when older adults retire, and do not participate in activities that provide stimulation and growth. In addition to maintaining and creating neuronal connections, creativity and environmental stimulation has been shown to increase acetylcholine production, the neurotransmitter most involved in memory and intellectual process, reported by Cohen (2001).

Clearly, creativity benefits brain chemistry. In Cohen (2009) the author states, “With aging, art is like chocolate to the brain” (p. 50). What he means by that is creativity helps the brain, so the brain likes it, so it puts itself into a position to promote creativity, just like most people’s relationship with chocolate. It accomplishes this in two ways: First, during the second half of life, the brain hemispheres work in synchrony with each other more, proving a better platform for creativity, described by Cohen (2009). Second, Cohen (2001), (2006), (2009) state there are four phases of human potential during later years which set the stage for creative expression: 1) Midlife re-evaluation phase (40’s – 50’s) is characterized by re-evaluation of life and sense of crisis or quest, which both stimulate creativity. 2) Liberation phase (60’s – 70’s) is characterized by added energy and new degree of personal freedom, which both charge creative endeavors. 3) Summing Up phase (70+) is characterized by an accounting of unfulfilled dreams and unfinished business that lead to a new creative burst to complete what is missing. 4) Encore phase (80+) is characterized by the desire to make a final impact to himself or herself or the community, which can shape creative expression.

As concluded by DahlBerg (2011), through creative activities, older adults “can engage their imagination, make new connections, discover a sense of purpose and feeling of personal growth, and express their creativity in ways that contribute to society” (p. 3).

Benefits of Creative Aging

In the last decade there have been several studies to quantify the effects of creative aging. Dr. Cohen headed the first landmark study, Cohen (2006 April), in which three sites across the country participated in creative programs which included painting, pottery, dance, music, poetry, drama, and oral histories in a creative context. It built upon two major ideas in gerontologic research: (1) Sense of Control and (2) Social Engagement. When older adults experience a sense of control or mastery of a skill, positive health outcomes are experienced. The same effects are seen when they experience social engagement with others. Cohen's study saw significant benefits from participation in creative programs compared to control groups including: increase in overall health, fewer doctors visits, less medication dependency, decrease in falls, more positive morale, less depression, and reduced risk of long-term care.

Other benefits described by Sherman (2006) include “[increased] self-esteem, ability to cope with stress, opportunities for life review, and recovery from loss or illness” (p. 43). Cohen (2006) and Cohen (2009) also declares that the feeling of mastery following a creative aging program benefits the immune system by increasing the number of natural killer cells and T cells. This is referred to as the psychoneuroimmunology effect. The author further explains that social engagement is associated with reduced blood pressure and stress levels.

In conclusion, there is clear community need for creative aging programs, especially in Utah. Keeping older adults healthy benefits everyone, has no side effects, provides economic savings of community resources, and promotes aging in the community. Based on all the data, creative aging is a natural, non-medicinal, brain-preferred means to achieve this.

Creative Aging Program Must-Haves

According to Patterson and Perlstein (2011), in order for a program to be successful, there are ten “must-haves:” Physical activity and movement, mental challenge and stimulation, social interaction, bonding and support, the need to acquire and refine new skills, activities that are multi-modal and combinatorial, enriched and stimulating environments, the room to fail and the wisdom to learn from failure, sufficient challenge to create mild (beneficial) stress, fun and challenging play, and reward. The resource Boyer (n.d.) is the ultimate resource when planning, implementing, and evaluating creative aging programs.

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