C

reative engagement is to the aging brain as physical activity is to the aging body. Just as studies have shown older adults who maintain higher levels of muscle strength, flexibility, and aerobic capacity are healthi-er and better able to engage in independent function longer than their more sedentary peers, an emerging body of literature suggests that those who engage in creative activities exhibit increased psychological well-being.

For example, findings from the federally funded Creativity and Aging study spearheaded by the late Dr. Gene D. Cohen and colleagues in the Center on Aging, Health, and Humanities at George Washington University, Wash-ington, showed that participation in community-based cultural programs improved both the general health and mental health of older adults. Specifically, the study recruited 300 healthy, ambulatory, older adults between the ages of 65 and 103 in New York, Washington, and San Francisco. Half of the participants were assigned to participate in professionally con-ducted arts programs, such as singing, creative writing, poetry, painting, or jewelry making, while the other half maintained usual activity.

Results from the Washington group showed that, after 2 years, the arts group reported better overall physical health, fewer doctor visits, fewer falls, and better scores on depression and loneliness scales. Additionally, the au-thors noted that participation in the community-based arts activities had a positive impact on the individuals’ ability to maintain their independence by reducing the risk factors “that drive the need for long-term care” (Gerontologist 2006;46:726-27).

Other studies have produced similar findings. In 1999, Frederick Tims, Ph.D., professor and area chair of music ther-a-py at Michigan State University, East Lansing, reported the results of the Music Making and Wellness Project in which investigators compared the well-being of 61 older adults who were assigned to participate in group keyboard lessons with that of a control group of similar aged adults who did not participate. After the music interven-tion, the keyboard group showed signifi-cant decreases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and increasing levels of human growth hormone—which has been implicated in a range of age-related health conditions.

In another investigation in the psychol-o-gy and theatre departments at Elmhurst (Ill.) College, evaluated the impact that a short-term theater arts in-tervention had on the cognitive and af-fective functioning of older adults living in the community. A total of 124 particip-ants aged 60-86 years were assigned to one of three group: theater arts, non-content specific visual arts, and no treatment. After 4 weeks, the adults in the theater arts group improved significan-tly more than the no-treatment control group in each of the four mea-sures: word recall, memory, problem solving, and psychological well-being.

Adults in the visual arts group showed smaller improvements relative to the theater group, according to the authors. Four months after the study, the theater group had maintained their performance improvements across all measures, they wrote. The authors concluded that theater training, even over a short time period, can help pre-vent cognitive decline associated with aging (J. Aging Health 2004;16:562-85).

Creative engagement also can improve the quality of life for adults with Alzheimer’s disease and other age-re-lated dementias. In an observational study published in 2005 in the American Journal of Alzheimer’s Dis-ease and Other Dementias, the well-being of 12 older adults with dementia im-proved while par-ticipating in an art program called Mermaids in the Making; they did during more-traditional adult day care activities. Specifically, participants in the program, which encourages self-expres-sion through the visual arts for adults in the early and middle stages of de-men-tia, exhibited significantly more interest, sustained attention, pleasure, self-esteem, and normalcy during the intervention period (Am. J. Alzheimers Dis. Other Dement. 2005;20:220-7).

More recently, researchers from the University of Wisconsin’s Center on Age and Community in Milwaukee reported that participation in a group storytelling program called TimeSlips, developed by the center’s executive director Anne Bast-ing, Ph.D., improved the alertness and level of engagement among individuals with dementia living in long-term care settings, compared with a control group of peers from nonparticipating facilities. The researchers also observed improved staff-resident interactions, social inter-actions, and social engagement in the participating centers (Gerontologist 2009;49:117-27).

Using the arts and creative engage-ment “gives us a way to focus on re-maining strengths and even growth during a time that is perceived as an in-crease to a total decline, which in turn brings meaning and hope to fam-ilies and care providers alike,” Dr. Bast-ing said in an interview. “All of these have positive effects on the immune system, the endocrine system, and the nervous system.”

She said several organizations sup-port creative engagement with well and frail older adults, and several well-known programs target this population. The University of Wisconsin Center on Age & Community Web site has an ex-press newsroom containing press rele-a-ses about creative aging. Other programs target this population.

Promoting Creative Engagement in the Elderly

PERSPECTIVE

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ncouraging creative engagement in older adults is a good strategy to maintain or improve mood and morale, although there is not yet enough re-search to show its indisputable efficacy.

Regarding the issues of mild cogni-tive impairment or decline, especially with memory loss caused by Alzheimer’s disease, the jury is still out because of the lack of quality science.

Many of the studies that demon-strate that older adults who are in-volved in participatory, community-based arts programs (music, art, storytelling, jewelry mak-ing, etc.) have improved memory and problem solving, and reduced rates of depression, anxiety, and so forth are promis-ing, but much more evidence needs to be accumulated before they can be recommended universally based on their scientific efficacy, particularly in patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

As the brain is capable of neurogene-sis, it might be that activities that in-crease the brain’s capacity might be protective of degenerative brain dis-eases, because the more brain a per-son has, the more he or she can afford to lose. However, based on the evi-dence, these interventions have not yet been shown to stop or prevent the pathophysiologic process in Alzheimer’s disease.

One of the persistent, pervasive problems haunting this area of re-search is that the definitions used by sci-entists to define mild cognitive impair-ment are varied, making the comparison between studies difficult. There also hasn’t been much work solidly connecting mild cognitive impair-ment with Alzheimer’s disease.

Those of us in the baby boom gen-eration are terrified of developing de-mentia, and, as a result, there is a tremen-dous push to discover how cog-nitive decline from Alzheimer’s disease can be staved off. Great care has to be taken, however, not to exploit this vul-nerability by promising that services, products, or activities with mental cog-nitive decline without the necessary quality science to back up the claims.

BY CARL C. BELL, M.D.

It is possible that participating in activities that challenge the mind, such as artistic expression stimulate growth of new brain cells in the cerebral cortex.

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