

## ***A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words – and Improved Quality of Life, Identity, and Purpose!***

*By Katie Johanson, B.A.*

Every stage of life is accompanied by change and transitions. As individuals enter older adulthood, they find themselves experiencing a variety of physical, social, and psychological transitions. These may include retirement, chronic illness, reduced mobility, moving from a lifelong home to an apartment or assisted living facility, caregiving for others, and experiencing the deaths of friends, family, and spouses. It is not unnatural for people experiencing these events to feel depressed, anxious, socially isolated, bored, or that their lives lack meaning or purpose. However, these feelings don't preclude the potential for happiness or a more fulfilling life. One way to regain a sense of meaning in older adulthood is through art and creativity.

The benefits of creating art have been documented by hundreds of studies in psychology. Engaging in art not only alleviates feelings of depression and anxiety but also affords one a sense of meaning and purpose through the process of exploring one's identity and reflecting on life. Furthermore, expressing oneself creatively offers a sense of control, the opportunity for healing and relaxation, and socialization. Making art is especially beneficial for those with cognitive impairment and chronic and degenerative diseases; engaging in the creative process expands neural connections in the brain, resulting in improved cognitive functioning. Furthermore, art offers an alternative means of communication other than speaking or writing, so it allows for creative communication with a friend or loved one with cognitive impairment. Overall, engaging in the creative arts process has the potential to enhance quality of life and let people reconnect with themselves and others.

Creativity and art are not limited to the fine arts, such as drawing, painting, sculpture, or collage. Rather, art can include anything from cooking, knitting, and woodworking to architecture, photography, and gardening. Creativity also can be expressed through how one dresses or decorates one's home. It is important to remember that, while you are creating art or otherwise engaging in creative activities, it is not the end result that is important. Rather, the meaningful component of creativity lies in the *process* of making art, gardening, crocheting, or building a birdhouse or bench. This occurs through the experience of "flow," a concept described by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is a form of concentration that involves becoming entirely absorbed in an activity. Everyone has experienced flow at some point – think back to a time when you were so concentrated on an activity that you lost track of time! Finding your flow is accompanied by feelings of enjoyment, meaning, effortlessness, and transcendence. Engaging in the creative process is one of the many ways to experience flow and improve happiness.

Older adulthood is an ideal time to explore untapped creativity and imagination through artistic activities. You can start your creative journey by purchasing art materials, using objects from nature (such as leaves or twigs), taking art classes in the community, meeting with friends

for creativity sessions, or pursuing art therapy. Remember, whatever you choose to do, it is the process of creativity that is most important – anyone can make art!

“Painters must want to paint above all else. If the artist in front of the canvas begins to wonder how much he will sell it for, or what the critics will think of it, he won’t be able to pursue original avenues. Creative achievements depend on single-minded immersion.” – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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