Art making is a form of human development, at any age, and it works its agency through the shifting of what an individual perceives as possible. As long as there is possibility, there is hope; in its absence, there is only despair. The sense of the possibility, complexity, and essential mystery of the world is what keeps the soul engaged with reality. (Permuth, 2006, p. 23)

Introduction

Although many older adults cope with challenges such as health conditions, economic insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, and grief and loss, aging can be a time of growth and fulfillment. A growing body of research demonstrates that engagement in the creative arts can enhance older adults' biopsychosocial well-being. The topic of creative aging has gained increased attention among practitioners and policymakers and is congruent with social work's strengths-based, person-in-environment perspective. Social workers play a valuable role in supporting creative expression as a form of communication and social engagement among older adults.
Aging professional artists

Recent surveys conducted by the National Guild for Community Arts Education, the National Institute of Mental Health, and Stern, 2011, also assert that “a new paradigm that articulates the idea of seeing older people for their potential rather than their problems defines the emerging field of creative aging” (p. 2). This paradigm aligns closely with the strengths perspective of the social work profession (Blundo, 2008; K. Stern, 2008). Social workers can promote older adults’ engagement with the creative arts in multiple ways:

- Identify local resources that promote creative aging
- Sites that may sponsor or host creative arts programs, classes, and other opportunities for older adults include public school systems, higher education institutions, lifelong learning centers, community arts schools, performing arts centers, local arts councils, parks and recreation centers, community and cultural centers, public libraries, aging and intergenerational organizations, senior centers, the emerging communities for older adults, health care organizations, and religious congregations (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Although some older adults may not wish to participate in age-specific programs, others may welcome the opportunity to develop skills alongside their peers. Moreover, some arts and aging programs may provide opportunities to develop intergenerational relationships.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Both social work and the arts operate on multiple levels—clinical, group, community, and political—and value cultural expression and diversity (Guiterrez & Creekmore, 2008). Both disciplines also foster intergenerational relationships (Hooyman, 2006; Larson, 2006). A recent study identified four intersections between social work and the arts:

(a) The arts and social work aim to emotionally, physically, and spiritually move us and be moved in the world; (b) both depend on the construction of language, expression, and communication; (c) the arts enhance personal and professional self-reflection; (d) the arts transcend social work knowledge dichotomies and provide an integrated model for social work's body-mind-spirit connection in a social context (Damarakis, 2007, p. 529).

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the arts have been linked historically with social work practice (Guiterrez & Creekmore, 2008) and that the emerging field of creative aging includes social workers. Hanna and Perlstein (2008) assert that “a new paradigm that articulates the idea of seeing older people for their potential rather than their problems defines the emerging field of creative aging” (p. 2). This paradigm aligns closely with the strengths perspective of the social work profession (Blundo, 2008; K. Stern, 2008). Social workers can promote older adults’ engagement with the creative arts in multiple ways:

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Be attuned to the forms of creative expression—past and present—that energize each older adult. Client references to dancing with a spouse or partner, acting in a high school play, or writing poetry can provide clues to fulfilling forms of creative self-expression and social engagement. Enjoyment of the arts need not be limited to participation in structured classes, programs, or organizations or even firsthand experience; however, commenting on a client’s habit of singing along with the radio, enthusiasm regarding a grandchild’s drawing talent, or excitement about the premiere of a local play can open the door to a conversation about activities that individual finds meaningful. Discussing an older adult’s experiences with the arts can facilitate not only life review and reminiscence but also reflection on the person’s
Aging professional artists remain engaged and productive as they age (Jeffri, 2007, 2011), and “artists who remain creatively engaged in later life also show flexibility in thinking and psychological adaptability to degenerative (physical) challenges” (Braevarsme Schmidt, 2006, p. 29).

These studies exemplify ways in which creative expression enhances older adults’ physical, psychosocial, and spiritual wellbeing. Furthermore, the growth of creative aging research and programs has been paralleled by the emergence of creative aging in the policy arena. The NEA convened a White House Mini-Conference on Creativity and Aging in May 2005 (Macey Boer, 2005), leading to inclusion of the topic of arts participation at the December 2005 White House Conference on Aging (Blanchard, 2006; Hanna & Perlstein, 2008).

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Be attuned to the forms of creative expression—past and current—that energize each older adult. Client references to dancing with a spouse or partner, acting in a high school play, or writing poetry can provide clues to fulfilling forms of creative self-expression and social engagement. Enjoyment of the arts need not be limited to participation in structured classes, programs, or organizations or even firsthand experience, however. Commenting on a client’s habit of singing along with the radio, enthusiasm regarding a grandchild’s drawing talent, or excitement about the premiere of a local play can open the door to a conversation about activities that individual finds meaningful. Discussing an older adult’s experiences with the arts can facilitate not only life review and reminiscence but also reflection on the person’s
Support older adults’ participation in creative arts activities. With their person-in-environment perspective, social workers are well equipped both to help older adults identify the ways in which the arts enhance their lives and to explore avenues for creative expression. Some older adults may prefer to engage in arts activities on an individual basis. Others may benefit from participating in community-based creative arts programs—such as choirs, orchestras, writing groups, quilting circles, or improvisational theater troupes. (Many programs welcome participants of all experience and ability levels.) Yet other older adults may enjoy taking classes or one-on-one lessons in a creative art they have done in the past or have wanted to learn. Some individuals may even wish to teach a class or start a program of their own. Social work knowledge of community resources, such as transportation and adaptive equipment, can also facilitate older adults’ participation in creative arts activities.

Collaborate with creative arts therapists and activities professionals. Thanks to the growth of art, dance, music, poetry, and drama/movement therapy, an increasing number of professionals trained in the use of the arts as therapeutic modalities are available to support older adults. Some, similar to social workers, even specialize in aging. The settings in which creative arts therapists work include health care and behavioral health organizations, nursing homes, home and community-based settings, educational institutions, and private practice. Social workers serve as valuable links to these professionals, who may— in turn—facilitate referrals to social work. With appropriate safeguards for client confidentiality and privacy, the two professions can exchange biopsychosocial information that may enhance assessment, intervention, and outcomes. Some social workers have even created collaborative programs with their creative arts therapy colleagues, such as a drop-in group facilitated by a social worker, art therapist, music therapist, and dance/movement therapist on a short-term rehabilitation unit (Froman, Patrick, & Kocher, 2010). Activities professionals (who work in health care settings, senior centers and adult day programs, assisted living communities and nursing homes, and other settings) also incorporate the arts in their work with older adults and are natural collaborative partners for social workers. Similar to creative arts therapists, these professionals are often adept at tailoring arts activities to the cognitive, physical, and psychosocial abilities of older adults.

New development arts and aging programs in partnership with arts organizations and professional teaching artists. Although the field of creative aging is growing rapidly, arts and aging programs do not yet exist in many communities. The Arts and Aging Toolkit (National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, 2007), available online in English and Spanish at no cost, provides detailed guidance regarding how to enhance, design, promote, implement, and evaluate participatory, skill-based arts and aging programs. Furthermore, a number of nationally recognized programs can serve as models.

Seek and develop continuing education opportunities addressing creative aging. The National Center for Creative Aging, which helped create the Arts and Aging Toolkit, regularly hosts webinars and symposiums. Other programs focusing on creativity and aging are available at geriatric education centers (see, for example, Washington DC Area Geriatric Education Center Consortium, n.d.), colleges and universities (such as the Shepherd University School of Social Work [Owens, 2010]), and national organizations, such as the American Society on Aging and the National Council on Aging. Other potential sites for creative aging programs include continuing education programs affiliated with schools of social work, aging and social service organizations, and arts organizations.

Conclusion

In recent decades, creative aging has emerged as a dynamic interdisciplinary field. Participation in the arts offers a vital avenue of self-expression and social engagement for older adults, and a growing body of evidence supports the biopsychosocial benefits of participatory arts and aging programs. Creative aging complements social work, and social workers can play an integral role in supporting creative expression among older adults.
Two studies by the Research Center for Arts and Culture found that aging professional artists reported high levels of life satisfaction, high self-esteem, and strong social networks (Jeffri, 2007, 2007). The study participants continue to create art and participate in the arts community as they age.

Current circumstances and future goals or concerns

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Develop new arts and aging programs in partnership with arts organizations and professional teaching artists. Although the field of creative aging is growing rapidly, arts and aging programs do not yet exist in many communities. The Arts and Aging Toolkit (National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, 2007), available online in English and Spanish at no cost, provides detailed guidance regarding how to enhance, design, promote, implement, and evaluate participatory, skill-based arts and aging programs. Furthermore, a number of nationally recognized programs can serve as models.

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References


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Practice Perspectives

Creativity and Aging

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