

Dementia through the Lens of Positive Psychology and Arts

Alison P. Cada

Faculty of Arts in Medicine, University of Florida

Hum 5357: Creativity and Health

Ferol Carytsas, MM & Keely Mason, MA

February 21, 2022

Abstract

Enhancing the quality of life of people living with dementia is a growing focus in society. This research aims to explore the efficacy of the arts and their impact on the quality of life of dementia clients if viewed from a positive psychology perspective. Using a cross-sectional analysis, this study analyzed the therapeutic benefits of the visual art program Opening Minds through Arts (OMA) in the overall health of dementia clients from various resources and disciplines and compared these results against similar studies conducted over ten years. Creative arts explicitly designed for dementia clients with integrated concepts of social theories benefit dementia clients. This study definitively answers the correlation between visual art and the quality of life of dementia clients through the lens of Positive psychology. However, further studies are needed to expand data and establish parameters.

Dementia Through the Lens of Positive Psychology and Arts

Quality of life is of the utmost importance in dementia, and the arts have a significant role to play for people with dementia (PWD) to thrive, feel useful, and valued. Dementia is a disorder affecting the brain that causes a set of symptoms such as memory impairment that takes away a person's ability to perform daily tasks essential for everyday living (Alzheimer Society, n.d.). In addition to their struggles, they are often marginalized due to stereotypes and public lack of awareness of the disease. Due to the debilitating effects of the disease, keeping the quality of life as high as possible for PWD is one of the few treatment options available to families. With no drugs currently available to effectively prevent dementia's inevitable damage to the mind, our best recourse is to utilize the arts in various care settings and integrate social science theories such as Positive psychology into the care approach.

In the world of dementia, creativity and the arts have been found to enhance engagement, improve communication, facilitate expression, and reawaken lost skills (Power, 2017). Arts encompass various modalities such as music, art (visual art), poetry, storytelling, puppetry, and more. Positive psychology is a scientific theory discussed by Seligman (2011) that focuses on the well-being of a person. When viewed through the lens of Positive psychology, arts can enhance the well-being of people living with dementia, promote their identity, and help establish a social connection. I will refer to 'the arts' as visual art for this research paper. Positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) can potentially improve the daily lives of people with dementia.

Wellbeing

The Arts Can Promote Quality of Life and Enhance the Well-being of Dementia Clients

Dementia can take a devastating toll on physical and psychosocial aspects of the PWD. Within the framework of Positive psychology, wellbeing is one of the focus areas that showcases human strong points, abilities, and talent (Seligman, 2011). Creative arts can keep the person's remaining strength such as creative skills, see the person beyond their diagnosis, provide meaning and promote wellbeing (Killick, 2016; Lokon, et al., 2012). In the face of declining cognition, sustaining personhood in dementia should be the prime responsibility of those providing care (Kitwood, 1997). They should do this by using creative arts to showcase their intact personhood and by valuing their unique talents and skills (Killick, 2016).

In the perspective of Positive psychology, arts can help improve well-being using a person-centred approach (Cohen, 2006), including those living with dementia. Some of the physiological benefits in participating in the arts include improved cardiovascular and immunological systems. Engaging in a person-centered creative arts activity can promote growth and learning, maintain personhood, improved cognitive processes and communication, and achieve wellbeing of people with dementia. (Kitwood & Bredlin, 1992; Zeilig et al., 2014)

One program that centered on this is the Opening Minds through Arts (OMA) (Lokon et al., 2012). OMA is a visual art-making program for dementia clients that promotes the autonomy, dignity, and wellbeing of a person. It is inspired by modern abstract art to allow the person to assert their creativity and individuality in the failure free process. According to Basting (2006), the activities for PWD need to be failure free to maintain personhood. It is based on positive psychology's person-centered approach-and designed to meet the five facets of wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011). OMA creative process goal is to maximize the possibility of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. xi). Flow is a state of mind in which a person is fully involved and fully immersed during

an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that can lead to positive relationship and wellbeing. Through OMA creative art process, PWD continue to learn and experience new and can have a profound impact on their wellbeing.

Connections

The Arts Can be a Catalyst in Developing Relationships in Dementia Clients

Creative arts give the person a sense of hope to make meaningful human connections. Fancourt & Finn (2019) encourage PWD and their carer to participate in the arts to nurture human social relationships, promote creativity, and improve well-being. In the face of diminishing intellectual capacity and verbal expression, art making is a powerful tool for PWDs to express themselves and develop social bonds. Self-expression during the creative process of the arts, such as making arts together, can foster worthwhile connections. Participation in the arts can promote social connection with the caregivers and the community (Sauer et al., 2016)

One of the missions of the OMA program is building relationships (Lokon et al., 2012). It is designed to be an intergenerational one-to-one ratio, bridging the gap between PWD and students, breaking down barriers and changing negative narratives attached to the person because of the disease (Danker et. al., 2021; Levenberg et. al., 2021; Lokon et al., 2012). Its main focus is the process over the result. By creating art together in OMA, social interaction occurs and acts as the catalyst in forming intergenerational social bonds.

Identity

The Arts Can Provide Avenues to Make Dementia Clients Feel Valued and Useful

PWD experience losses as the disease progresses, including their sense of self and identity (Alzheimer Society, n.d.). They are often labeled as patients, clients, or residents – just receivers of care. There is also a misconception that productivity and creative potential diminishes with age (Killick, 2016). The diminishing effect of dementia can take away social roles of the person and they may consider themselves as a non-contributing member of society (Basting and Killick, 2003). With the support of social environment that includes the arts, a personal and social identity of the person emerges in the context of person-centered care (Kitwood, 1997).

It is possible for PWD to feel useful and valued through the arts. Participating in the arts gives dementia clients a purpose, structure, and an avenue for self-discovery (Basting & Killick, 2003), and can regain some of their personhood, identity, strength and learn new skills (Sauer et al., 2016). The arts give PWD an outlet to express themselves and create something new (art) that makes them feel valued as contributing members of society (Harlan, 1993; Sauer et al., 2016) to help preserve a sense of identity and can give rise to new social roles.

Another goal of OMA is to display what PWD can do through an art exhibition in a gallery setting to show their creative capacity (Lokon et al., 2012), to celebrate the person, and to create awareness about their role in addressing social issues surrounding the disease (Yamashita et al., 2013; Danker, et. al., 2021). Lokon et al., (2012) also added that the arts can evoke a sense of control, confidence, self-esteem, and satisfaction that provide dementia clients a new social role from person who receives care to an artist. The dementia clients who participate in the OMA program are called OMA artist (Danker, et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Through the lens of positive psychology and art as the bridge, PWD can still learn and grow, make choices and connections, preserve their identity, and improve overall well-being. By looking beyond their diagnosis capitalizing on their remaining strengths, dementia clients can thrive and improve their quality of life through the arts. In addition, using the arts to promote social connection, PWD can take on new roles. Because no cure is available, our best option is to promote the person's health through arts.

Considerations and Gaps and Future Possibilities for Arts in Health Practice in Dementia

Since OMA works with vulnerable seniors, an added layer of complexity is involved. The program facilitators should be deemed competent and knowledgeable in their roles. It is essential to set the standard of care, level of training and knowledge in arts and dementia. It is also crucial to use more specific terminologies that describe the people and processes involved in the program. Some of the gaps noted in the research include a lack of evaluation in other OMA art processes. The studies do not have the clients' socio-economic background, gender, age, specific type of dementia, and religious background. The number of participants involved in the study is limited. For future exploration, investigate the lingering positive effect of the arts and its ripple effect on other aspects of life, such as the social network. Investigate how PWD perceives the arts before and after the diagnosis. Offer alternative solutions if the one-to-one ratio is not maintained and how to sustain the program if funding is challenging.

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