

An exploration of creative ageing and social theatre

The words 'creative ageing' may sound to some people like a contradiction: we are creative when we are young, we consolidate when we reach middle age and we consolidate even more as we get older. However, this is not born out with evidence, as more and more authors publish their first novels, obtain university degrees or embark on new adventures when they reach the years of maturity.

Although the situation may be different when people are living in residential care, nevertheless, perhaps it is time to re-think attitudes and activities for people of older years. There is enough evidence-based practice to show that maintaining attachments and engaging in social theatre and arts-based therapies are important activities for elderly people and will help to slow down their deterioration and loss of memory.

One of the difficulties we face when we are living in group homes is the loss of our important role within the family. Traditionally, grandparents would often live nearby and would take on certain functions. Some societies, such as the Malaysian Temiars, regard grandparents as having wisdom because they have lived many years:

'You must know something because you have lived a long time.'
(Jennings, 1994)

Research

Research into brain development demonstrates that brains are capable of much more flexibility than we first thought (Cozolino, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004). We do not have 'fixed skulls', but rather our brain growth changes through our early relationships and creative stimulation.

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There is enough evidence to show that maintaining attachments and engaging in arts-based therapies are important activities for elderly people. Dr Sue Emmy Jennings explains.

Initial research with Romanian orphans who had been deprived of early social contact showed that their brains had holes in them because certain areas had not developed (Chugani et al, 2001). However, in order to maintain that growth, we need

to continue meaningful relationships and creative stimulation throughout our lives, especially as we get older.

A fascinating book, *Keep your Brain Alive* (Katz, 1999), promotes the idea that physical activity is necessary in order to keep the brain agile. Both bodies and brains need exercise on a regular basis and it is extremely important to maintain the stimulation of our sensory system. Our senses ground us in time and space and enable us to differentiate past and present experiences.

I have written extensively on the development of the sensory system for survival (Jennings, 2003). We say 'come to your senses' or 'you have lost your senses' to describe when someone has 'lost the plot'. There is a wealth of sensory exercises, some of which





are described, so that no one is in danger of his or her sensory input becoming bland.

My own work, born out by the Lysistrata experiment (see later), shows that we need a balance between routine and surprises. The completely predictable routine contributes to a closing down of our faculties. A life that includes surprises will continue to challenge our mental and emotional capacities. Katz (1999) also suggests that predictability deadens the senses and that life should contain some excitement!

Myers (1993) discusses the connections between mental health and the support systems that we have in place. We need to 'engage with life' and maintain close social relationships. The author's hearing has begun to deteriorate and he has written extensively about his personal experience of both ageing and hearing loss in recent years.

Aims

The aims of 'creative ageing' are to create and develop the following:

- Individual and group relationships

through mutual interests and support

- Social theatre (Jennings, 2004) and artistic activities
- Artistic therapies for depression, bereavement and dementia.

Examples of methods

Individual and group relationships

Social relationships are encouraged through mutual interests and hobbies, with an emphasis on active hobbies rather than passive ones such as watching television. I find that people respond to being in small groups rather than in a crowd (Weisberg and Wilder, 2001), so I create a lot of activities to do in pairs or threes.

Handcrafts are done round a collection of small tables rather than one big one, which allows for more personal conversations and no-one being left out. I also encourage poetry and play readings and people choose a favourite poem to read with a partner.

Social theatre and artistic activities

This topic carries on from the first section because creative activities also help

to create social relationships. Most people already have programmes of art and crafts, painting, embroidery, knitting and sticking.

I also include clay modelling and I make play dough (plain flour, water, handful of salt, 4 tbsps of oil) (Jennings, 2005) because it is very good for exercise and keeps stiff hands and fingers supple. It can be used to model and if the models are baked, they can then be painted. Many decorations in charity shops are made from dough.

Social theatre is a bigger group activity that is not concerned with commercial theatre, nor is it therapy. It is theatre that is created by and with a group on themes that have significance for the group. It may well be performed to friends, but that is not the main aim. I find it brings together ideas from everyone through discussion or from a script or fairy story.

The advantage of a fairy story is that most of the group will know it. I make sure that I have cross-cultural stories that both widen everyone's perspective and are essential for mixed race groups. The idea of



doing drama can be intimidating for some people and needs to be introduced slowly, but it can be very rewarding.

Some of the above activities may well help people who are depressed and certainly the creative stimulus helps those with early signs of dementia. However, in certain situations more specialist help is needed and art, music, drama or dance-movement therapy can be made available.

There are many highly skilled practitioners who would undertake assessment and then a therapeutic programme both for individuals and groups. A local arts therapist could give a talk about his or her work and how it can be an alternative to counselling.

Application

I directed the play of *Lysistrata* in Israel with Arab, British and Jewish actors and offered it as an interactive performance (social theatre) for community groups. *Lysistrata* is a play from ancient Greece and it is about a group of women who refuse to give their husbands sexual favours until the fighting stops. Some of the dialogue is very explicit and the innuendo very strong.

An enlightened social worker suggested we performed it in a day centre for people with Alzheimer's disease. Although nervous, the actors gave a rich performance and were not fazed by people wandering onto the stage area. However, the majority of people were engrossed in the play and two women in the front row called out encouragement to *Lysistrata* to stand up to the magistrate and not be bullied.

At the end of the performance, one of the women wanted to play *Lysistrata* and confront the magistrate and her friends cheered on. We developed a workshop in which the men and women could try on costumes, play the musical instruments and role-play brief pieces of dialogue. Their attention was sustained throughout.

The next day I had a telephone call from the manager of the day centre, who thought I would want to know that not only did everyone remember what they had done the day before, but this was the first time they had recalled the previous day's activities. She also said that there was a very relaxed atmosphere in the centre because of the play and they were talking about it in an animated way.

She then went on to add that the play had freed the elderly people, both men

and women, to be able to talk about sex and that this had been a difficult area for most of them. The situation had been somewhat strained, she said, because a lot of the care staff were young and untrained, and became easily embarrassed. However, through the vehicle of the play this had changed, and both staff and attendees were able to have relaxed discussions.

The group with strokes

I have worked with this elderly group for the last 12 months. My older brother having a stroke and then making a wonderful recovery prompted the initiative. He developed his own system of music and movement and then began to work at his local hospital and stroke club.

The basic exercise routine that I do has developed in very interesting ways. Rhythmic movement is essential as we work from the feet upwards: marching on the spot, rotating ankles, moving heels and then toes. Arms and elbows become more vigorous as we pretend to push people out of the way or elbow our way in. Simple head turning and nodding, circling of shoulders and shrugging form the core. People also like to sing along with popular songs from their generation of music.

I tentatively introduced the idea of massage and immediately the group were delighted. We changed the beginning to hand massage with hand cream and then a shoulder and back massage that is appreciated by everyone.

So many of these people sit in their wheelchairs and have little sensory stimulus, touch or movement. Their relationships focus on their immediate carers and groups with whom they play card and board games.

What soon transpired was that they wanted tales of my travels. Because I work

a lot abroad, they want to know all about what I do and where I do it. This, of course, is another aspect to the sensory stimulus and maintenance of the imagination. It is also a social relationship that is unique for them, as I seem to have a role rather like a pirate uncle who brings travellers' tales to an awaiting audience!

Closing thoughts

This article has drawn attention to the fact that as we grow older, we need more stimulation not less, and that our brains and imagination will thrive on artistic activities.

I have also described the importance of social relationships for the maintenance of mental health. Physical activity will make for a more active mind, and a combination of creative activities with social relationships will help to ameliorate the onset of depression and dementia. **NRC**

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KEY POINTS

- **The maintenance of meaningful social relationships is essential as we grow older.**
- **Physical activity combats mental deterioration.**
- **Surprises and excitement are an antidote to too much routine and predictability.**
- **Through artistic activities, a resident can express emotions and maintain brain function.**
- **Work in small groups increases communication.**
- **Social theatre is a collaborative medium which enables people to express their own ideas and beliefs.**

