



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING ART TO WORK WITH ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

Scientists who have studied Alzheimer's disease say that art helps the patient to gain access to memories that are locked away in the brain. It is believed that memories are stored as images rather than words. Alzheimer's does not take away the person's memories, but the access to them. Art seems to get that access back. Amazingly, the erosion of mental faculties due to Alzheimer's can sometimes make way for a creative side. Patients who have Alzheimer's often display artistic abilities that were repressed or unused during their lifetime. Art helps to improve the patient's ability to focus and concentrate. Seniors can often continue to recognize colors and shapes even after they have forgotten words.

For the Alzheimer's patient, creating or viewing artwork can help unlock memories and promote conversation and interaction about personal experiences and life stories. It can provide a calming effect, reduce depression and boredom, and furnish a feeling of accomplishment. In creating art, the end product is not as important as the process, allowing the patient to be engaged in the present with a meaningful activity.

Using art as a tool for engagement and creative expression is one of the most successful activities for a person living with Alzheimer's disease. Examining a famous masterpiece, viewing pieces at a local arts and crafts festival or creating a simple piece of art together can create a special bond and provide a great deal of pleasure.

According to the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation, research shows that learning new things and social interactions are key elements of

keeping memory loss at bay. Participating in arts activities is a great way to learn a new craft and to socialize with others.

Please see “Recommendations for Creating Art with Senior Citizens” as you are planning your sessions with your Alzheimer’s patients. In addition, here are some suggestions to include in your planning:

- Limit the group size to about six to eight for each facilitator.
- Plan to spend about an hour on the art activity. If participants tire, become distracted or lose interest, take a break.
- Make an art project a routine activity. This gives people with Alzheimer’s something to remember and look forward to each day. Don’t worry about the end result; enjoy letting them be creative.
- Use safe and simple materials to keep them from getting hurt or frustrated. Watercolors, markers and crayons make ideal art supplies. Clay is another good option since it doesn’t matter if it is used correctly.
- Take into consideration the former interests of the patient and current abilities when selecting projects.
- Do not create projects that seem childish but select projects based on the current level of activity and ability.
- Don’t expect the participants to finish the project in one setting and allow them to work at their own speed, even if they get distracted.
- Consider inviting family members to work side by side with the patient in creating art—it can be a special time for bonding.
- Look at art by visiting a museum or art gallery. Looking at art displays can be enjoyable and help the participants retain their focus on one thing for a period of time.
- It is helpful to play quiet music in the background to stimulate creativity.

Note: The Alzheimer’s Association has an art program called “Memories in the Making” that trains facilitators in conducting art lesson.