



Alzheimer's
Australia
Living with dementia

DEMENTIA AND ART

Tips for art at home



The power of image making is that it allows those living with dementia to express themselves in ways that are satisfying and communicate with others. The made image does not disappear and can be rediscovered.

Art at Home

Everyone is creative. Finding ways to express our creativity is part of being human. Some people enjoy cooking, others planting gardens, choosing clothes, arranging rooms, inventing things, singing or playing music. Others express their creativity with paints, in poetry or prose. Artistic expression should be a part of living positively with dementia.

A person with dementia may not be able to connect with their creativity without help.

Prepare the space

In advance, find a table at a comfortable height and prepare the space which will be immediately in front of the person. Set out paper (A4 is a good size; coloured paper is fun), art materials (oil pastels, a box of water colours, textures etc) and a pen and pencil. Leave the choice open as to whether the person may wish to paint, draw or write.

Start from something not nothing

Provide visual images such as shells, flowers, seeds or autumn leaves. Photos and picture books may also inspire. Bring things of beauty. Put them within reach of the person with dementia. If need be, pick up an object yourself and hand it to the person with dementia telling him or her what it is - "This is a beautiful shell. It's got a lovely pattern on it."

Help make the first marks

Be ready, if necessary, to help make the first marks on the paper. Keep your marks simple. If your loved one has been an artist, start with a small mark or shape. Otherwise draw a circle or another shape. Hand over the brush or oil pastel to your loved one, and let her or him make marks. Occasionally you may be asked to draw, say, a tree. Start the image so it is recognisable, and again hand over the pastel.

Take dictation

If your loved one wants to express themselves by talking about a topic, take dictation. Read out what you have written. You are helping their brain recall how to write. Hand the pen over after a few sentences.



Duets can be fun

Start by making an image of a happy time you spent together. Hand the oil pastel or pencil over to the person with dementia and encourage her or him to draw something she or he remembers.

Treat whatever is produced with respect

Artwork is an expression of your loved one's creative being. Ask him or her to sign it. Mount it on coloured paper or laminate it. Photocopy the image and turn it into a card to send out to other family members. Or perhaps frame it and give it to a grandchild.

Do not voice criticism

All marks should be welcomed. If you do not understand the image, admire the colours or the patterns. If words are misspelled do not correct them. Try and imagine what the word might be. Do not correct memories you remember differently. Treat stories as works of the imagination. Read texts aloud with the person living with dementia.

Tips for carers

A person providing care, day in and day out, needs ways to nurture himself or herself. Creative activities are one such way. It is hard helping someone else to be creative, if you have no opportunity to be creative yourself.

Set up a space for yourself

When you have short breaks during the day, set up a space with the materials laid out. Have a pen, notebook and oil pastels or paints ready, and some quality paper. Choose somewhere comfortable.

Catch creative minutes

Don't wait for the creative moment - any moment can be creative. Trust your hand and your imagination.

Start at once and work for the minutes you have. Leave your creative work out so that you can come back to it.

A daily ritual

Make art a daily activity like cleaning your teeth.

Give yourself small treats

Treat yourself to new materials - a pen that writes smoothly, or oil pastels in new colours. Small gifts are a way of respecting yourself.

Respect your creative work

No creative act is wasted. Never tear up your work. Use it in later works - collage 'failed' images or add phrases to later pieces of writing.



You can learn more about dementia and ways to help by contacting Alzheimer's Australia in your State or Territory. Visit our website or phone the National Dementia Helpline.



An Australian Government Initiative

National Dementia Helpline
1800 100 500
alzheimer.org.au

For further information:

Patricia Baines, **Nurturing the Heart**: creativity, art therapy and dementia. Alzheimer's Australia 2007

Thanks is extended to Dr. Pat Baines for preparing this brochure. Pat, an anthropologist, psychologist and art therapist, works with Alzheimer's Australia Tasmania.