The Relevance of Creative Expression Interventions to Person-Centered Care

Alzheimer’s disease (AD) and other dementias currently affect an estimated 5.3 million Americans, a figure that is expected to rise to 7.7 million by 2030 (Alzheimer’s Association, 2009). Medications approved for the treatment of AD (cholinesterase inhibitors and memantine) have shown small beneficial effects on cognitive functioning but inconsistent effects on behavior and quality of life (Raina et al., 2008). Developing effective nonpharmacological interventions that improve quality of life and reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms in those with dementia is critical because of the limited efficacy, side effects, and high cost of currently available pharmacological treatments.

Creative expression programs, such as storytelling, visual arts, dance and movement, music and songwriting, and dramatic arts, represent a highly innovative nonpharmacological approach to research and practice in dementia care. Creative expression is characterized by active participation in the process of bringing something new into existence. The “something new” may include the production or performance of art or the creation of an original idea, perspective, or process. In the case of individuals with dementia, creative expression activities offer the opportunity for self-expression, social interaction, communication, sensory stimulation, and emotional relief in a failure-free environment. Creative arts therapies provide an alternative means of expression for those who have lost the ability to express their thoughts and feelings through rational language.

Among the creative arts interventions for individuals with dementia, music interventions have the strongest research base. Music is generally thought to stimulate reminiscence, elicit positive feelings, promote verbal skills, and reduce state anxiety. However, very few studies have been designed to compare outcomes across various art programs or compare outcomes of an individual art program with usual care activities. The tenets of person-centered care (e.g., respect for individuality, exercise of remaining strengths, support for personal agency) echo the importance of measuring the effects of a variety of creative expression programs in people with dementia.

Creative expression interventions should stimulate and engage individuals with dementia at the highest level possible to promote engagement and enhance mastery, but they should not outpace their abilities. The extent to which these individuals can engage in creative arts activities depends not only on the severity of their disease but also on the region of the brain affected. Those with AD lose their ability to copy images but may retain semantic memory in relation to those images, whereas those with frontotemporal dementia may be able to copy images perfectly without understanding their meaning. Therefore, verification of diagnosis and dementia staging is essential for making credible generalizations of research findings.

To advance nursing knowledge about the benefits of creative expression interventions for people with dementia, future research should address the problems besetting earlier studies: atheoretical investigations, small convenience samples, use of instruments not validated in this population, unblinded data collectors, inadequate description of measures and interventions, age-inappropriate interventions, lack of attention to gender or cultural preferences, and limited long-term follow up. In addition, the sustainability of any creative arts program, particularly in long-term care settings, must be considered.

Recent national interest in both dementia care and the arts in health care is encouraging. In 2003, the National Endowment for the Arts developed a strategic plan that included a goal to conduct qualitative and quantitative research on the value of the arts in health care. In addition, professional arts societies and philanthropic foundations
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have provided funding for research targeting dementia care. However, for creative expression programs to gain widespread acceptance as effective interventions in dementia care, the important elements of these programs need to be identified and linked to measurable and clinically relevant outcomes.

REFERENCES

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