

Cultivate Your Creativity Now to Cope with Stress Later

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An article in the January 11 *Hartford Courant* inspired this blog post. “Can the Arts Heal” by Fredrick Kunkle of the Washington Post reviews research on arts and wellness. There are many challenges: poorly designed studies without controls, sample sizes too small to prove relevance, and limited funding for something that is not quantifiable. Regardless, there’s a strong body of research that the arts help people cope. What’s missing is the big question – **will the arts help YOU cope when YOU need it?** The answer may be “no,” unless you cultivate creativity now.

Chances are good that YOU will end up with some sort of disability in late-life. We’re good at keeping people alive longer, but they live with chronic conditions such as severe arthritis limiting mobility, impaired vision from glaucoma or macular degeneration, Alzheimer’s disease or other cognitive impairments, diabetes, or movement disorders such as Parkinson’s or MS. The key to SUCCESSFUL AGING is adaptation. The arts help you adapt and maintain a quality life.

As I look at my friends and those younger than me (I’m a Gen-Xer, kid of the 80s), I see more reliance on little boxes of technology. The technology might be helpful as we age, but let’s face it: aging services are often the LAST to get new technology. The arts are timeless and readily available. **Music, dance/movement, art, cinema/drama, poetry** require little outlay of cash. But if we don’t cultivate our ability to use the arts to help us NOW, then it will just be “an activity” later in life.

Here’s what I mean. The article had a picture of a gentleman with paranoid schizophrenia who paints murals. The ability to paint reduces his need for medication – maybe eliminates it. He said, “The paintbrush and the art give me an outlook and a feeling of serenity and peace, love and joy. The paintbrush is the treatment for all else that has failed.” But if he didn’t LOVE painting, it would just be busy-work and he would still need lots of medications to treat his symptoms.

I once saw a resident who looked bored, and I asked her if she wanted to draw (I’d seen her drawing in the past). Her response was “Drawing is what they have us do when they don’t know what to do with us.” Ouch. I don’t think that was true, but at the very least, that was HER perception (and perception is reality, especially to those with dementia).

So what will YOUR future look like? Will you see the arts as “just an activity” in your boredom-filled days, something offered between the primary activities of meals and personal care? Or will you look forward to free time, trying to figure out if you have enough time to finish crocheting the afghan for the new grandbaby, or eagerly waiting for the paint to dry on your ceramics, or allowing the songs you sing to bring memories of what you can no longer see? CULTIVATE YOUR LOVE OF THE ARTS and it could free you from the confines of your age-related conditions. Make time for them every day now, and they will help you cope with the changes of aging. Adaptation is the key to successful aging, and the arts will help you adapt and live a life worth living. If you don’t know where to start, begin by reading our other blog articles on Zen Tangles, Timeslips creative writing, Poetry and Life Enrichment.

Also check out www.agingcareacademy.org for more information on the arts and creativity throughout life.