



Rekindling the creative spark as you age

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My two young children explore new pursuits with ease and enthusiasm. Whether they are building indoor forts on a rainy day, marveling at tiny creatures found in the garden, or developing their voices for calling birds, their fearless sense of adventure is both daunting and inspiring.

As we grow older, with so many responsibilities competing for our attention, our unbridled enthusiasm and sense of adventure can shrink to a sense of caution, or even trepidation.

Yet, many older persons are finding rewards by rediscovering their sense of adventure during retirement. Retirees are learning that engaging in new activities and experimenting in creative ways of thinking yield emotional, intellectual, and physiological benefits. Finding the creative self is rewarding and stimulating.

Arizona artist finds joy in discovery

At home in her art studio in Tubac, Arizona, Virginia Hall relates the creative experience to Eleanor Roosevelt's sage advice, "Do something every day that scares you." A professional artist since her retirement, Hall continues to find exhilaration in the "scary" places of art. "I don't know of a better way to achieve a scary moment than to engage the creative process," she says.

Hall compares life to her artwork metaphysically. "It's somewhat of an illusion to think that you're making something. Oh, yes, you can paint a canvas or form a piece of clay. Ultimately, you're seeking a discovery," she says. "The point isn't the experience itself, but how it affects your sense of well-being and self-expression. Look within and around

yourself."

For older persons, Hall believes that exercising the creative process can lead to self-discovery. "In Western culture, art is seen by many experts as a gateway to the right, or intuitive, side of the brain."

Participation unlocks the door to mental and emotional benefits, neuroscientist says

Hall's belief that pursuing creative activities can provide mental and emotional benefits is supported by neuroscientist Denise Cortis Park, Ph.D. "Today, science is learning more about cognitive health and how we can actively remodel ourselves by participating in activities to engage our neural circuits. The key is moving beyond merely observing activities to participating in them."

Park, a scientist in the field of cognitive research of the aging, is with the University of Texas at Dallas Productive Aging Laboratory, agingmind.utdallas.edu. Her professional areas of interest include the neuroscience of memory and aging, as well as how cultural differences might affect patterns of neural activation. She is particularly interested in learning if stimulating cognitive and social experiences can enhance brain function in older adults.

Popular forms of self-expression among retirees range from writing, music, painting, and sculpture to gardening, golf, and travel. "The key to satisfaction is finding the right level of challenge in these activities--a balance of sufficient rigor to be exciting, but not so taxing as to cause frustration and abandonment," Park says. "What is routine for one person may be very challenging for another. Pursuits should be evaluated against an individual's creative yardstick."

Beyond being inherently pleasing and satisfying, this stimulation by new pursuits might lead to the creation of what Park calls "enhanced neural scaffolding--growth and development of certain areas of our brain and mind."

Geriatrician recognizes value of shared or individual creativity

"When considering what activities to pursue, don't allow your 'art form' to be too narrowly defined," suggests Dennis McCullough, M.D. A family physician and geriatrician for more than 30 years, McCullough is the author of [**My Mother, Your Mother: Embracing "Slow Medicine," the Compassionate Approach to Caring for Your Aging Loved Ones**](#) (HarperCollins, 2008). He is a faculty member in the Department of Community and Family Medicine at Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, New Hampshire.

McCullough continues, "Be aware of what level of social engagement or contact is optimum for you. For some persons, a large amount of shared activity is stimulating, but for others, the need for more individual quiet time is necessary for their creative pursuits. Establishing the right amount of sufficient space is very important to ensure that your

individual needs are met. And perhaps most important, you need to let go of the notion that you are being judged. Engage in these activities as a form of play!"

Music making turns out to be a hit

The more than 60 members of the Iowa City [New Horizons Band](#) have discovered a creative form of play in making music together. Since 1995, the band has provided an opportunity for adults 50 and older to learn or continue to play musical instruments.

Band leader Don Coffman, Ph.D., comments, "New Horizon Band members taught me that having fun and never losing sight of fostering social relationships are as important as making music." Two times a week, band members meet at a local [senior center](#) to rehearse for a performance and concentrate on learning to play better.

Coffman is a professor of music education at The University of Iowa. Student teachers from the university provide additional support and motivation for band members, who thrive on the encouragement of younger professionals.

Coffman has also organized several intergenerational band concerts with players ranging from elementary school students to seniors. "Music is timeless," observes a French horn musician. "We don't think about age, we just make good music together."

Creative opportunities abound at continuing care retirement communities

The residents of Cathedral Village, an accredited continuing care retirement community (CCRC) in Philadelphia, www.cathedralvillage.com, take advantage of the many and varied artistic activities the CCRC offers. President/CEO William Owens says, "Socialization is an important component of pursuing creative interests in retirement. Creativity is also something that makes us unique and human. It allows our residents to express themselves emotionally. When they pursue creative interests, they are relaxing their bodies as well as stimulating their minds."

Cathedral Village provides the facilities and financial support for these programs, and most of the classes are organized by residents who volunteer their time and talents.

Director of Horticulture Peggy Schofield, says, "At Cathedral Village, we approach each person in a holistic way--physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

"Self-esteem is the best measure of a person's psychological well-being. In certain situations, older persons are coping with numerous issues and can easily become depressed. They come to our professionally equipped greenhouse, and we have a great time creating flower arrangements. This is a wonderful way for them to set aside the things they may be dealing with."

Cathedral Village resident and water colorist Beth Glendinning echoes the reasoning, "You lose yourself in creativity. You forget about your aches and pains, and you immerse

yourself in the subject you are painting." Glendinning is both a teacher and a student of art at the CCRC. "I had given up art and didn't come back to it until I was in my seventies. Art allows me to express myself and gives me something to look forward to. I can't wait to go to the studio to teach and learn."

On the other side of the United States, several residents at the accredited Arcadia Retirement Residence in Honolulu, www.arcadia-hi.org, volunteer to teach classes ranging from fashion design to painting to dance.

Director of Programs and Wellness Ethie Mendonca, reflects, "I believe the benefits of creativity are endless in fostering mental and physical health among residents here in the retirement community. A sense of bonding is created through sharing new ideas and helping others learn something new."

Lifelong artist and Arcadia resident Barbara Betts, adds, "With paints or collages, you have a chance to work with line and color, which is more creative than putting together a jigsaw puzzle or working a crossword puzzle. Although all of these activities challenge the mind, painting requires you to closely observe the subject you're trying to draw."

Arcadia resident, fashion designer, and seamstress Gertrude Ogawa senses camaraderie among the residents. "If someone who signed up for a class has difficulty, someone else is right there to help," she says. "It's amazing to see people accomplish things that they thought they could not do."

Writing brings learning opportunities for older adults

While the Iowa City New Horizons Band members and the residents of Cathedral Village and Arcadia Retirement Residence discover creative benefits in collective art experiences, Charles Jacobs finds his life is recharged through writing, a more solitary experience. "In writing, I am happy with a capital H," he says. "I go to sleep thinking about my next chapter, and I wake up eager to spring out of bed and write."

"I am continually learning," the author of more than 750 articles and several books says from his home office in northern New Jersey. "Writing compels you to organize your thoughts and the information you have gained from interviews and research."

Jacobs was president and publisher of the Alameda Newspapers in California before retirement freed him to write creatively. Jacobs' *The Writer Within You: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing and Publishing in Your Retirement Years* (Caros Books, 2007) has won numerous awards and citations, and he hosts a website dedicated to the topic of seniors honing their writing skills, www.retirement-writing.com.

Jacobs believes older adults bring a perspective to their writing that younger writers cannot capture. In *The Writer Within You*, he advises aspiring older writers that they "have the unique ability to call upon years of rich experiences and a great deal of acquired knowledge."

Like learning to master a musical instrument, Jacobs insists practice is essential to good writing. "Write regularly and at a set time, even if just for an hour or two. If you fail to make writing a part of your daily routine, your writing skills will slip away."

Good reading is an important step toward good writing. "Exhaust the genre that you plan to write in," Jacobs urges.

Writing can fill several niches for older persons. "Foremost, writing can fulfill dreams," Jacobs says, citing a 2002 survey in which 81 percent of American adults said they have a book in them that they would like to write. "Writing can also supplement your income, especially important to retired persons who are on fixed incomes or might have seen their savings evaporate. In addition, writing is way for older persons to leave a legacy to their families regarding the wisdom they have gained over a lifetime."

Age need not diminish creativity and the joy of discovery

All of the older adults interviewed in this article admit that age may limit them physically, but it cannot cloud their spirits. Cathedral Village resident Beth Glendinning says, "Keep your mind going. You can't do a lot about your physical infirmities. As the Quakers say, 'Honor our diminishment.' Work with other generations. Stay busy, involved, and active."

Octogenarian Arcadia resident Satsuki Izutsu lives the philosophy of "You are never too old to learn." She relates, "I was always interested in learning to play the harp, but, growing up on an island plantation, you couldn't find a harp, let alone a teacher. Last year, I was fortunate enough to acquire a Celtic harp, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it. I am proud of picking up this skill at my age."

Artist Virginia Hall says, "I might not be able to stretch canvases for the seven-foot paintings like I used to do, but the sense of discovery--the 'scary' moments--are always part of my engagement with my art."

Future generations can enjoy the legacies of creativity

Many cultures celebrate the wisdom of their elders. Arcadia resident Barbara Betts notes, "Kupuna is often used here in Hawaiian schools. Kupuna is an older Hawaiian man or woman who tells the traditional stories of our heritage to school children. That tradition of carrying on the stories, myths, and ideas is fabulous."

"It will be interesting to see the gift that is passed down from the creative efforts of today's retirees" Dennis McCullough, M.D., says. "By studying what they produced, we will have a good idea what they thought about and wanted to share."

These individuals have rediscovered the enthusiasm and sense of adventure that they experienced as young children. Their stories can inspire us to rediscover our own creative

selves and explore new pursuits in our retirement years.

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