

3 | The impact of art and culture on people with dementia

«You have given us wings, you are not afraid of us.»

Quote from a participant at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

Creativity and phantasy are long retained in people with dementia. It is therefore not surprising that many people that live with dementia enjoy art and culture. It evokes associations with colours, feelings, objects or memories and can be an expression of what they feel and think. Contemporary and classical art have the power to enhance quality of life. It is widely accepted that artistic and cultural practices can have a positive impact on the quality of life of persons with dementia. As a result, the arts are increasingly included in health care provision (Zeilig et al., 2014, 2018). Artistic programs for people with dementia usually put the person with dementia at the center. The programs are based on the premise that creativity remains intact despite any cognitive decline caused by the condition (Dassa & Harel, 2019).

It is generally believed that:

- Participating in an arts activity can re-trigger individuals with dementia, and stimulate **cognitive functioning** (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013; Goulding, 2013; Tan, 2018).
- Participating in an arts activity can provide a successful experience that can counteract stress, damaged self-esteem and depression, and can contribute to **improved self-esteem** (Dassa & Harel, 2019; Goulding, 2013).
- Participating in an arts activity allows persons with dementia to **express their feelings and identity** in several ways, as often the verbal is less prominent in art, and the physical is more central (Dassa & Harel, 2019; van Dijk et al., 2012).
- Arts activities can provide a platform to share interests and **strengthen social relationships and bonds** (Goulding, 2013).

Presented below is **an overview of the potential beneficial impact of arts programs on persons with dementia by artistic genre**. We would like to point out that although there are many scientific studies that focus on the positive impact of arts interventions on persons with dementia, it is difficult to translate the effect to current scientific standards. This means that there is little robust scientific evidence for it. Most evidence on the program effectiveness is observational and/or based on anecdotes (Jaaniste et al., 2015).

Few studies provide information on important variables such as the specific context, participants' types/stages of dementia, and the course and structure of the interventions (Lyons et al., 2018). Results are often generalized by artistic medium, without considering differences in impact of different methods or styles within a single medium, for instance, dance (Mabire et al., 2019). Additionally, there is little research on the long-term outcomes that arts programs can produce (van Dijk et al., 2012). Finally, there has been limited attention to the effects that arts interventions can have on the social inclusion of people with dementia (Skinner et al., 2018).

3.1 | Theatre

Theatre interventions have been shown to have beneficial effects on (a) the memory functions, learning and self-esteem of people with dementia (Dassa & Harel, 2019). In addition, drama-based interventions also contribute to (b) their communication skills and ability to express themselves (Dassa & Harel, 2019; Jaaniste et al., 2015). Theatre activities also have a positive impact on (c) difficult and changing behavior of people with dementia as they learn to trust each other (Jaaniste et al., 2015). Last, (d) theater programs offer an opportunity to



socialize and relate to others differently. Results are better when the activities are facilitated by professional actors instead of caregivers (van Dijk et al., 2012).

Theatre interventions appear to have a positive effect on the memory functions, learning and self-esteem of people with dementia. Throughout the process of the condition, people with dementia often lose their freedom, their loved ones, partners, memories, as well as any significant life roles that they had. They may feel that they are no longer who they thought they were. Theatre programs can help people with dementia regain self-confidence in a playful way. A focus on their creativity and spontaneity shifts the focus from their loss (Jaaniste et al., 2015). Exercises that focus on the retrieval of memories may create a positive self-image (Dassa & Harel, 2019).

In addition, **drama-based interventions also contribute to the communication skills of participants** (Dassa & Harel, 2019; Jaaniste et al., 2015). By encouraging them to express themselves, participants are able to tell their stories, express their emotions, formulate goals and try out new roles and identities. Through the use of humor and improvisation, theatre practice can reduce stigma and help participants to deal with difficult topics, related to loss, mourning and end-of-life issues. Research shows that theater programs that deal with these issues do not increase negative feelings of participants, but rather improve their quality of life, bring joy and help people with dementia to understand each other better.

Next, through the use of theatre, **anger, frustration and loss can be expressed in a safe environment.** Jaaniste et al. (2015) found that people with dementia who participated in the sessions that they studied became calmer over time. Moreover, theatre programs also seem to contribute to sociability (Dassa & Harel, 2019; Jaaniste et al., 2015). During theatre activities, the people with dementia connect and interact with each other in another, often very spontaneous way. Through the activities, they learn to trust each other. This may also lead to benefits in their every-day life, as through theatre, they learn to trust themselves to be more independent (Jaaniste et al., 2015).

A note of attention

These generalized findings obscure the fact that there are many different forms and formats of theatre. Research about the impact of specific theatre methods or forms is however on the rise. As example, we can refer to the Veder method, which is widely used and much researched. It has been found to lead to many positive effects. If the method is applied by professional actors, it has clear positive effects on the behavior, mood and quality of life of people with dementia. They show less isolated behavior, up to two hours after the intervention. Participants laugh a lot during the intervention and are less confused compared to people with dementia who did not undergo the



same intervention. In general, people who have participated are happier afterwards than others. Moreover, people who participate in the Veder method also dare to touch each other more (van Dijk et al., 2012). Thus, their social relationships improve (Boersma et al., 2019). Participants also indicate that they feel more at home. In addition, they remember more memories, even two hours after the intervention (van Dijk et al., 2012).

3.2 | Music

People with dementia are still able to listen to music and remain sensitive to it until the final stages of dementia (van Dijk et al., 2012). Moreover, **research claims that of several non-pharmacological interventions, activities with music are most successful in reducing behavioral symptoms of dementia** (Leggieri et al., 2019; Ueda et al., 2013). Music has been shown to have a positive effect on the state of mind of persons with dementia, in reducing feelings of depression and anxiety (Dassa & Harel, 2019; Gaviola et al., 2020; Scott & Kidd, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). There are also positive effects noted in terms of disruptive and aggressive behavior (Gaviola et al., 2020; Leggieri et al., 2019; Scott & Kidd, 2016; Sherratt et al., 2004; Ueda et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies claim that musical activities have a positive impact on the cognitive functions of persons with dementia (Gaviola et al., 2020; Leggieri et al., 2019; Scott & Kidd, 2016; Sherratt et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2017). **Music interventions are also found to have a positive impact on the levels of engagement, participation and social behavior of persons with dementia** (Dassa & Harel, 2019;



Gaviola et al., 2020; Leggieri et al., 2019; Sherratt et al., 2004). Interventions lead to better relationships of people with dementia amongst themselves and with their caregivers. Last, Leggieri et al. (2019) observed an improvement in sleep by increasing melatonin levels and balancing hormones. Researchers also found that people who participated in music programs spent more time with their meal (Sherratt et al., 2004). Singing even adds to the abovementioned positive effects. Research shows a better short term and long-term memory. Singing together with people with dementia and their families stimulates social contact and connection.

A note of attention

Two important aspects to consider are the duration of the program and the way it is organized.

Duration

A study by Gaviola et al. (2020) shows that a strong decrease in anxiety only occurred when music interventions lasted longer than three months.

In group or on an individual basis

Individual sessions seem to have the best overall results, while group activities are more effective in reducing agitation, anxiety and irritability, especially in people with mild and moderate dementia (Ing-Randolph et al., 2015; Leggieri et al., 2019; Scott & Kidd, 2016). Moreover, activities organized in groups have a more positive influence on the social behavior and state of mind of people with dementia and (in)formal caregivers (Ing-Randolph et al., 2015).



3.3 | Visual arts

The museum context is believed to serve as a free space where persons with dementia can participate in art activities unconstrained (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013; Tan, 2018). It is considered ideal for promoting the general well-being and social inclusion of persons with dementia (Hernández Belver & Hernández, 2019). **The pioneer in organizing art activities aimed at people with dementia in a museum context is the Museum of Modern Art in New York** (Rosenberg et al., 2009). In 2006, they launched the 'Meet Me at MoMA' program, an activity for individual visitors with dementia and their caregivers (Rosenberg et al., 2009). Since then, several museums followed with their own program or integrated the Meet Me program into their own offerings (Kinsey et al., 2021).

Regier et al. (2017) analyzed 158 museum activities for people with dementia and came to two observations. First, they found that **all persons with dementia, from an early stage**



Expertisecentrum Dementie Vlaanderen (Belgium) - Cera © leodebockphotography.com

to an advanced stage, can be meaningfully involved in museum activities. Second, their analysis showed that depending on the progression of dementia, activities for persons with dementia need to be simplified on the one hand and supported by auditory and tactile interventions on the other hand (Regier et al., 2017). Although everyone can be meaningfully involved, it should not be assumed that every person with dementia finds all activities appealing and should be encouraged to participate at all times (Nyman & Szymczynska, 2016).

3.4 | Dance

Dance programs gain popularity, because of the perceived benefits that they offer. **A dance intervention combines the benefits of physical exercise with cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social and psychological benefits** (Mabire et al., 2019). Dance is also multidimensional. Music, exercise, senses and social factors are all integrated in dance (Guzmán et al., 2016). Dance programs are therefore found especially suitable for engaging people with dementia, despite the cognitive changes and social and physical challenges that the condition brings (Skinner et al., 2018). People with dementia who cannot stand up for long can for instance be involved in dance activities by having them sit on a chair (Mabire et al., 2019).

Dance interventions can have a positive impact on the physical activity of people with dementia (Mabire et al., 2019). Older people are increasingly at risk of falling, especially people with dementia. Falling is associated with pain and loss of self-confidence (Abreu &

Hartley, 2013). Researchers cite that motor learning is relatively well preserved in people living with dementia (Ho et al., 2018). **Dance interventions can help people to become more aware of their bodies and how the body moves and functions** (Ho et al. 2018). Through dance, individuals with dementia can experience improvements in strength, balance, functional mobility, speed and walking distance (Abreu & Hartley, 2013). Dance interventions have been shown to have positive effects on older people's risk of falling (Abreu & Hartley, 2013; Mabire et al., 2019).

Dance-based interventions slow down the progression of dementia, as they activate brain areas affected by the condition and linked to perception, emotions, executive tasks, memory and motor skills. By activating these areas and mechanisms through movement, an improvement in cognition can occur (Ho et al., 2015; Mabire et al., 2019). An improvement in brain plasticity can already be obtained through activities that are not demanding on a physical level, and through one hour of dancing a week. **It has been found that the hippocampus, which is responsible for memory and is one of the first areas to deteriorate, increases in volume during aerobic exercises involving rhythm.** The memory of people with dementia therefore improves with such physical activities. Long-term memories and the associated emotions can be restored (Ho et al., 2015).

Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that dance activities can have a positive impact on behavioral and psychological symptoms (Mabire et al., 2019). Activities improve quality



'Dancing Stories' (The Netherlands) - Marjan Oostmeijer and a participant, © HANNN

of life, have a positive impact on the mood of people with dementia and counter depression (Goldstein-Levitas, 2016; Ho et al., 2018). In the study by Ho et al. (2018), people who had been living with the condition for one year reported feeling less lonely. People with dementia found dance interventions enjoyable and felt that it had made them stronger and helped them to make links between their thoughts, feelings and physical stimuli (Lyons et al., 2018).

In addition, as non-verbal medium, dance provides an opportunity for people with dementia - as their verbal abilities decrease - to express their thoughts, emotions and memories through movement and the body's power of expression (Ho et al., 2015). First, this can increase their self-confidence and self-image (Jaaniste et al., 2015; Goldstein-Levitas, 2016; Ho et al., 2018). Second, it can make people accept their dementia better and make them express and share their feelings about it (Ho et al., 2015). Next, group dance classes can have a positive effect on the social interactions between people with dementia (Mabire et al., 2019). The dance activity can provide the opportunity to physically touch each other, depending on the dance style (Skinner et al., 2018). People feel more connected and integrated with each other (Ho et al., 2015; Jaaniste et al., 2015). Group classes can also counteract feelings of anxiety and isolation (Ho et al., 2015).

A note of attention

Despite the benefits that dance can bring, Ho et al. (2018) stress that it is important that the activity is frequent and intense enough to really see an improvement on a cognitive level. Furthermore, the dance activities should challenge the individual's physical abilities (Ho et al., 2018).

Dance interventions are not limited to one genre, there are many different dance forms and styles. The above-mentioned findings are therefore generalizing in nature. Research about the impact of specific dance styles or forms is however on the rise. As example, we can mention the DANCIN method, as researched by Guzmán et al. (2016). The music used in the method, namely 'Latin ballroom' music, evokes positive emotions, as it was described as 'cheerful music'. This method can improve the state of mind of people with dementia and have a positive impact on behavior. The intervention can be used to combat depression or irritability and increase self-esteem (Guzmán et al., 2016). The study by Guzmán et al. (2016) furthermore shows that the appetite of participants increased. Finally, the DANCIN method also has a positive influence on the physical abilities of people with dementia, as they increase. There is also a change in terms of mobility.







'Books & Do' - Biblionet Groningen (The Netherlands) - Ida Buijs and a participant, © HANNN


3.5 | Literature and poetry

Reading is an important skill in life, not only to navigate daily activities and participate in the labour market, but also to enjoy the richness of literature in any form. Whether it is novels, short stories or poetry, written words can take you out of the here and now and allow you to travel to unknown and even non-existent places.

Research indicates that literature-based interventions may have value in terms of the well-being of persons with dementia (Longden et al., 2016). For example, **shared reading** is a social-psychological intervention developed by Jane Davis, director of 'The reader' in Liverpool , in close cooperation with Philip Davis of the Centre for research into reading, literature and society (CRILS) of the University of Liverpool (Davis, 2020). The key ingredient of the intervention is **reading a text aloud in a group and sharing how the text is experienced**. The focus is on these experiences, not on what is exactly in the text or on a literary analysis. Timely pauses and rereading allow all participants to engage with the text. According to the initiators, shared reading is for people of all ages, backgrounds and life situations and is therefore organised in, for example, local libraries or local community centres. The organisation 'The reader' has also started to organise shared reading sessions for specific groups, for example persons living in poverty or dealing with a severe illness, including persons with dementia. Research confirms that reading has beneficial effects (Billington, 2019).

In Flanders, the shared reading intervention is organised by ‘Het Lezerscollectief’ . They organise training for reader companions, provide a library of texts including short stories and poetry and continuously develop the shared reading intervention further, in cooperation with ‘The reader’ in Liverpool. In recent years, shared reading has also been organised for persons in need of care: *“Shared reading seeks to reach, among others, people who are vulnerable: persons with physical or mental difficulties or limitations, those living in poverty, those confined to prisons, ... People in these categories do not always have access to thought-provoking literature or else their social background often leads them to be categorised as ‘people who are not interested in books’.”* (Raes, 2021, p. 15).

In this context, ‘Het Lezerscollectief’ has also started to train reader companions who, as volunteers or staff members, organise shared reading for persons with dementia in nursing homes. In 2022 and 2023, the existing work will be expanded to include training twice a group of twelve additional reader companions and learning about critical success factors for reading with persons with dementia.

In the Netherlands, shared reading for persons with dementia is organised by ‘De Culturele Apotheek’ .

In Denmark shared reading is organised in many libraries. The library sector is currently training its master trainers to spread the method as a form of core service in the libraries. The Reading Association IE Læseforeningen is the most experienced in training reading guides in Denmark.

Since many people in the target group lose the ability to read, it is essential to bring other senses into play when mediating literature, like Spoken Word or Multisensory Storytelling.

A note of attention

Although shared reading with persons with dementia is an innovative and therefore recent intervention, there are several points of attention, most of them not too surprising but nevertheless useful to mention.

- Don't read long novels or stories that stretch over multiple sessions and do not expect participants to remember the parts read weeks ago.
- Although some of the participants may no longer be able to read, provide (in large font) copies of the texts being read. Otherwise, some participants may feel excluded.



- Given this group is often of advanced age, pay attention that the hearing aids work properly.
- Make sure you have a quiet location, where there can be no disturbance, for example from other caregivers who are already setting up for lunch.
- Allow an hour to maximum an hour and a half per session and try to limit the number of participants to 8 or 10.

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