

Making Art Tied to Fewer Cognitive Problems in Old Age

A Mayo Clinic study finds decades spent on creative work pay off.

TOM JACOBS · APR 8, 2015

Are you concerned about developing thinking and memory problems in old age? [Research suggests](#) there are ways to increase the odds you will stay sharp, including mental stimulation, physical exercise, and healthy eating.

A just-published study from the [Mayo Clinic](#) points to yet another activity that, consistently pursued for decades, may be even more effective at warding off cognitive decline: making art.

The study, which featured 256 people in their mid- to late-80s, pinpointed various activities that either predicted cognitive impairment or protected against it during the final years of life. As noted in other studies, an active social life—whether in midlife or in both midlife and late life—was linked with fewer instances of mild cognitive impairment. So was late-in-life computer use.

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But the behavior that had the greatest protective effect, at least in this relatively small study, was “artistic activity,” such as painting, drawing, and sculpting.

“Long ago, ‘an apple a day keeps the doctor away’ was a common expression,” Dr. James Galvin writes in a

comment accompanying the study, which is published in the journal [Neurology](#). “Perhaps today, the expression should expand to include painting an apple, going to the store with a friend to buy an apple, and using an Apple product.”

Since participants reported on their midlife activities as well as what they were engaging in at the current time, the researchers were able to parse not only which activities appeared to protect against mild cognitive impairments, but when they were the most effective.

For instance, engaging in social activities in midlife was linked to fewer memory or thinking problems, as long as people did so both in midlife and late in life. The relatively few people who only began socializing as seniors had cognitive impairment rates equal to those of people who, as a rule, didn’t engage in social activities at any point.

In contrast, learning how to use a computer late in life had a highly positive impact—actually greater than for those who picked up the habit during their middle years. Perhaps seniors who discovered the joys of surfing the Web provided their brain with a new form of helpful stimulation.

The number of participants who reported they were artists was relatively small: 45 of the 265. As a group, they were significantly less likely to suffer from incidents of cognitive impairment than those who never touched an easel or a piano key.

But the subset of 18 who reported they took part in such activities both in midlife and later in life (as opposed to stopping in their senior years) did phenomenally well, with only three reporting incidents of mild cognitive impairment. That 16.7 percent rate compared to 49.2 percent among those who were not engaged in artistic activities.

Regularly engaging in craft activities such as woodworking, quilting, or sewing was also linked with fewer incidents of mild cognitive impairment, as was (to a lesser but still significant extent) participating in “social activities.” But at least in this population, those who were engaged in the arts were the least likely to suffer from such problems.

“I really do not know why the results for engaging in the arts are stronger than other activities,” says lead author [Rosebud Roberts](#). “These activities may all have a role in keeping brain cells stimulated, and may help develop new neural pathways. Or continued engagement may enable a person to develop a larger cognitive reserve from which to recruit alternate brain cells to take over function from cells which no longer function.”

In any event, these results suggest that behaviors intended to ward off mild cognitive impairment “may need to begin in midlife and persist throughout late life,” as Galvin puts it in his commentary. So if you have an itch to start painting or learning a musical instrument, don’t wait until retirement. Start now.

[Findings](#) is a daily column by Pacific Standard staff writer Tom Jacobs, who scours the psychological-research journals to discover new insights into human behavior, ranging from the origins of our political beliefs to the cultivation of creativity.