

Book Chapter

The Magic of Paint

Liggett, S and Wyatt, M

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35 The magic of paint

Susan Liggett and Megan Wyatt

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how painting can enhance the wellbeing of people living with dementia. Arts in health is a developing area that is now recognised as a means to improve people's health and wellbeing while supporting current major health and social care demands. With dementia being the largest social and health care challenge in the United Kingdom, it is imperative to develop new, creative ways of improving the lives of those living with or affected by the condition.

Painting can provide new forms of purposeful experience and engagement for people living with dementia, which can improve their wellbeing. This is important and should be recognised as an alternative pathway in supporting people living with the condition to create meaningful experiences.

Learning point 1 – Expression of memories and feelings

We all have memories that are fuelled with emotions, and these can at times be hard to communicate verbally. Before you read the next section, you may want to consider the following points to help you to relate to the experiences that are described. Consider the following questions in relation to your own experiences, or those of other people you know who are living with dementia:

- When you think of a memory, does it make you feel a certain way?
- Do you have a favourite colour, and if so, can you say why this is?
- Do different colours remind you of different things?
- Do you ever look at a piece of art and find it reminds you of something?

As humans, we constantly reflect on our memories and feelings within our daily lives. However, for people living with dementia the ability to draw upon and verbally communicate these experiences can become restricted, and sometimes it is not possible to communicate with others (Alzheimer's Association, 2018). This can cause numerous difficulties for those living with or caring for someone living with the condition.

Painting can provide a new avenue of communication for people living with dementia, which can create feelings of reassurance and relief. Colour, form and gesture can all be used as a means of expression in painting and can be accessed even when verbal ability may be compromised.

This process of expression is unique to the creator and, regardless of whether the painted form appears representational or abstract, painting encourages emotive and spontaneous expression.

People living with dementia often maintain a rich inner life; their emotional capabilities may be preserved even when they are no longer able to communicate verbally. Painting allows an expression of these emotions without a reliance on words.

The role of colour in painting is important in expressing memories and feelings for people living with dementia. Colour is flexible in the painting process and can be used as a means of intuitive, emotional or representational expression. For example, a green may be used to depict the leaves on a visible tree, or the artist may have a particular preference for bright orange but cannot say why. People living with dementia often have the ability to relate colours to specific memories or feelings but may not be able to articulate the reasonings behind this. Painting provides an alternative means of expression and the choice and application of colour allows people living with dementia to make non-verbal decisions. This in turn can enhance their self-esteem (Killick & Craig, 2012).

The importance of colour can be seen in the following words, spoken by Mary, a lady living with dementia who attended an arts workshop that we ran:

Because the thing is – as I'm doing the pink cloud, I find myself cheering up, it's not been a good day for me, I had a dreadful night, a lot of pain, up with pain, I don't think they are pink, but I'm not fed up anymore, I've cheered up as I went on.

The recall of memory can make people living with dementia feel a specific way (Alzheimer's Society, 2020). The emotive process of painting can therefore support people living with dementia to reconnect with memories and feelings, which in turn can provide immersive and meaningful experiences that do not rely on words.

James, who attended the same art workshop for people living with dementia, painted a small man-like figure in the corner of the piece of paper (Figure 35.1). Although James found it difficult to verbally communicate, his wife linked what he had painted with a poem that he had recited earlier that morning:

He recited a poem this morning that he remembered. He said a friend of his did this verse, blue legs with black teeth and blue legs. He's done his with blue legs now.

The use of motor skills in painting can encourage the recollection of memories in alternative ways. Therefore, painting should be thought of as a mechanism for people living with dementia to access and experience memories and feelings.



Figure 35.1: 'Blue Legs', by James

Learning point 2 – Reflection

Within the creative process (for example, while painting), naturally you will be constantly reflecting on the development of your work. This might be a conscious thought process, or it might be an experience that defies verbal articulation. Consider the following questions in relation to your own experiences, or those of other people whom you know who may live with dementia:

- How do you decide when you have finished a painting?
- Do you ever feel that your painting work feels 'just right'?
- Do you ever know what needs to be added to your painting but are unable to say why?

At times the process of reflection in painting can be easily verbally articulated. For example, the artist may be trying to paint something representational and will be able to say why a certain colour needs to be added. However, there is a second type of reflection in the painting process that provides a much more intuitive form of knowing. This involves feelings of correctness, even if the reasoning behind it cannot be communicated. Wilson (2010) suggests that, when painting, the artist

engages in a constant feedback loop whereby every mark is both different to and influenced by the previous one. These reflections are based on an intrinsic relationship between the colour, marks and composition within the work, with each influencing the others.

Throughout the art workshop, Mary regularly stopped and looked at her painting and made comments such as ‘that needs to be straighter’ or ‘I need to add another pink flower there’ (Figure 35.2). She would then carry on painting, and this process would be repeated. It was evident that this reflective process was beneficial for Mary, and at the end of the art workshop, she looked at her painting and said, ‘I think it’s magic.’

Figure 35.2: ‘Pink Clouds’, by Mary



People living with dementia have the potential to access this mode of reflection within the painting process, even if they are unable to communicate this verbally. Furthermore, people living with dementia can have feelings of certainty about when their painting is finished. Elkins (1999, p.14) describes this moment for the creator as a ‘magical point’ where there is an intuitive understanding that the painting is complete. The importance of this experience of knowing and reflection for people living with dementia should not be underestimated. Reflection within the painting process can facilitate non-verbal modes of thought that support people living with dementia to make decisions and contemplate thoughts. This is something they may not always be able to do easily otherwise.

What’s more, the constant cycles of reflection that occur within painting facilitate feelings of freedom and spontaneity. This promotes a developmental process where there are no rules or pressures to adhere to. Feelings of wrongness

can be easily overcome through the ever-evolving activity of applying paint in different ways. This non-verbal mode of thought allows people living with dementia to make numerous decisions without the feeling of incorrectness. Painting should therefore be used to promote feelings of autonomy for people living with dementia and used as an alternative pathway to supporting them to maintain some levels of control even after their verbal abilities have declined.

Another participant in the art workshop was Daisy, who had advanced dementia. Although Daisy had limited verbal ability, it was clear that, while painting, she reflected on her artwork throughout. She would stop and look at her painting and then add tiny marks to specific areas. This provided Daisy with the opportunity to make decisions without the need to verbally articulate anything.

Learning point 3 – Immersion

It is likely that we have all had an immersive experience where there is a complete focus on the task at hand and a lack of awareness of external realities. Think about the following questions in relation to immersive experiences within the creative process and consider your own experiences, or those of other people you know who may live with dementia:

- When in the past have you experienced a feeling of immersion?
- How do you feel when you are engaged in an immersive experience?
- Do you find that these immersive experiences provide relief from any negative feelings?

Painting can facilitate immersive experiences for people living with dementia, which in turn can increase feelings of self-esteem and confidence.

The creator's own thoughts and feelings, in combination with the physical engagement of paint, can provide an experience whereby there is a full focus on the present moment.

Mary described how she was painting her old garden. Throughout the workshop, Mary's full focus was on the painting, and when asked if she found the process relaxing, she replied:

I do, I not only find it relaxing, I find it, the picture that's in my head is cheering me up, I mean it's not exactly coming out because I'm not a talented painter you see, but I think that actual painting like this is relaxing, you see the very stroke gives it expression.

The nature of dementia can mean that it is often difficult to cognitively process the future or past, which can force people to live in the present moment. Immersive experiences within painting can embrace this focus for people living with

dementia and subsequently embrace a person's abilities rather than focusing on their challenges and losses (Killick & Craig, 2012).

Painting can also be used as a mechanism to provide relief for negative emotions, such as anxiety and grief, for people living with dementia. Engaging in an immersive experience can provide a distraction from negative feelings and promote relaxation and calm. Painting can therefore be used as a tool to ease the frustrations or anxieties of a person living with the condition. Furthermore, the focus on a person's abilities will support the re-integration of those living with dementia within society through creating a sense of purpose.

For example, when James entered the room, he was visibly upset and began to cry. Although he could not communicate fully, it was clear that he felt frustrated about how he had become dependent on his wife and felt a loss of independence. However, when James was supported to paint, he became immersed in the process, and he stopped crying. The process of painting provided an immersive experience that helped ease the negative emotions that James was facing.

Conclusion

For people living with the condition, painting can provide a communication and stimulation of emotions and memories, an embracement of feelings of uncertainty, experiences of reflection and an immersive experience. This can provide new, individualised forms of engagement that access a fundamental part of the emotional being of a person living with dementia.

Painting should be acknowledged as a means to support people living with dementia to access new experiences and develop their knowledge and understandings. This focus on a person's abilities rather than their difficulties can support them to feel a sense of purpose and integration in society.

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