REVIEW OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

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The rapidly swelling number of seniors with dementia has increased interest in quality of life interventions, such as activities in the visual and performing arts. We undertook a systematic review of research publications on creative expression activity programs designed for people living with dementia. Our goal was to learn about the nature and parameters of such programs as well as about the evidence of their effects on quality of life. A search of the past 10 years of publications on Social Works Abstracts, PsycINFO, PsychExtra, AgeLine and CINAHL yielded 98 reports of empirical research that focused on music, art, drama, dance, laughter, reminiscing, singing, storytelling and spiritual interventions. The programs described in these reports were based on 18 different philosophical approaches to care, they involved 55 different types of creative activities, and they offered nearly 300 different recommendations regarding programs’ planning, clients’ selection and dementia level, frequency and duration of sessions, facilitators’ skills, space design, art supplies and budget. Our review revealed the increased use of creative expression interventions by medical researchers interested either in treating ‘troubling’ behaviours or in exploring brain changes that might be brought about by engaging in such activities. Also, effective collaborations between researchers with different types of expertise in the arts versus in medicine contribute to a fuller understanding of creative abilities in people with dementia. We found a growing interest in mixing activity programs, harvesting anecdotal experiences, encouraging the “enjoyment of the moment” and the possibility of learning capacities of people living with dementia.