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Creative engagement as a pathway to healthy aging in dementia

As the global population ages, dementia continues to challenge healthcare systems to move beyond symptom management toward approaches that support quality of life, participation, and personhood. Although pharmacological treatments remain important, there is increasing recognition that healthy aging also requires interventions that preserve dignity, autonomy, and meaningful engagement.

This presentation examines how individualized art therapy may contribute to healthy aging among older adults living with dementia. Guided by the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC)—a conceptual framework originally developed by Vija B. Lusebrink and further developed by Lisa D. Hinz to understand information processing through art-making and to individualize therapeutic interventions—the presentation explores how creative engagement can build on preserved strengths despite progressive cognitive decline.

Evidence is drawn from a randomized controlled study conducted in a Canadian complex care setting involving older adults living with dementia. Participants received either an ETC-informed, individualized art therapy intervention or standard art activities for approximately 4 months. Outcomes included cognitive functioning, quality of life, and patterns of creative engagement.

Participants who received the ETC-informed intervention demonstrated improvements in language-related cognitive functioning and quality-of-life indicators compared with the comparison group. Clinical observations further revealed sustained engagement, visual organization, purposeful decision-making, and meaningful participation throughout the art-making process. These findings suggest that individualized art therapy may support communication, cognitive functioning, and psychosocial well-being while creating opportunities for expression, connection, and continued participation.

Beyond reporting research findings, this presentation considers the broader implications for interdisciplinary dementia care. It argues that person-centred interventions should focus not only on managing cognitive decline, but also on recognizing and building upon the capacities that remain. Supporting healthy aging is ultimately about creating opportunities for purpose, connection, dignity, and meaning throughout the dementia journey.

Keywords: Dementia; Healthy Aging; Art Therapy; Expressive Therapies Continuum; Person-Centred Care; Quality of Life