

# The senior years: Time for creativity

Not only do our brains naturally increase in their capacity for creativity as we age; creative activity helps to deepen that capacity, drawing on the learning and experiences that we have accumulated over the years.



Psychologists have observed parallels between the distracted, more broadly focused and less inhibited brains of elders and the creative brains of artists of all ages. They found that both brains have a knack for synthesizing diverse stored knowledge and experience to solve problems. Another similarity between elders and artists is their general willingness to speak their minds and act regardless of social pressures. All good stuff when it comes to creative self-expression.

Say “creativity” and you probably think of the arts: music, writing, painting, photography... But given the right passion and intent, anything can become an art form, whether it involves playing chess, solving crossword puzzles, creating hand-made greeting cards or knitting sweaters.

Seniors can and should find their particular form of expression and develop it for more than reasons of self-fulfillment. Think how important a sense of purpose is for anyone. In younger years, many people find it in careers, running a household and raising kids. Once those major responsibilities are in the rear-view mirror, creative endeavors and the tangible pieces of work that result do more than fill a void – they provide a new direction and purpose.

Creative activity is inherently engaging. It is “doing” requiring attention, imagination and focused mind/body action. It contributes to mental, emotional and physical health by helping us grow in mind and spirit and connect to a sense of competence. Health benefits include sharpening cognitive abilities, building positive attitudes, and strengthening hand-eye coordination and overall dexterity. This is one way to age well.

Creativity covers a lot of ground. In addition to the visual, music and writing arts, there are hundreds of craft-type pursuits that can be every bit as satisfying to engage in. What about creating a life-story book populated with a lifetime of photos? Hand-made clay pots? Decorative candles? Knitted wall hangings? The important thing is to identify an interest and develop it.

For inspiration, consider some of those who did great work in later years:

- Guitarist Les Paul had a steady weekly gig at the Iridium club in New York right up until his death at age 94
- American screenwriter Millard Kaufman became a novelist for the first time at age 90 with *Bowl of Cherries*
- Grandma Moses took up painting in her late 70s and produced work until her death at 101
- Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens at age 78

- Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was 92 when he finished his design of New York's Guggenheim Museum
- Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi wrote his opera *Falstaff* when 85 years old

The take-away from these examples is that creativity can flourish at any age. It is its own reward, and even the means to speak to those who come after us. There are few better ways to carry messages, lessons or ideas forward than investing yourself in a creative work.

