

## Aging “creatively” benefits mind, body, spirit

By *Eileen Beal*

When Dr. Gene Cohen, head of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University, spoke about “creative aging” at Cuyahoga Community College last year, he introduced the audience – physicians, nurses, social workers, and art therapists – to a groundbreaking idea.

Everyone, he said, knows the positive benefits sustained exercise – even moderate exercise – has on aging. It helps keep the heart, lungs, vascular system and brain in good working order. It keeps muscles toned, bones strong and joints juiced and flexible. And it floods the brain with feel-good hormones (endorphins) that help fight stress.

Few people know about the positive benefits that another kind of sustained exercise – participation in art programs that have participants stretching and flexing their minds and “thinking outside the box” – seems to have on older adults. Nor are they aware of how easy it is to keep things going after they’ve taken the plunge.

“Getting creative in your later years is a self-fueling engine. The more you do the more you can do,” explained Cohen, whose book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life* is making big waves in the aging and arts communities.

So far, said Cohen, the studies of creative aging – which he also referred to as productive aging – have been completed with people (between 65 and 103) who participated in organized art programs, such as painting classes, poetry writing workshops, or choral singing classes.

According to Cohen, the studies’ results far exceeded researchers’ (and probably participants) expectations.

Those who participated in art programs learned new skills and new ways of looking at and expressing things. They also reported a higher overall rating of physical health. They visited doctors less often, used fewer over-the-counter and prescription medications, and experienced fewer accidents and falls, said Cohen.

For some reason, sustained participating in a program seemed to have a very positive impact on the body’s immune system. “It’s that mind-body connection,” noted Cohen. But that wasn’t all that came out of the studies.

Participants also reported higher levels of self-esteem, better over-all morale, and an increase in the total number of activities they were participating in. “It’s as if they said, hum, I can do this. What else can I do? And then they went out and did that, too,” said Cohen.

The impact sustained participation in an arts program has on physical and mental health makes a lot of sense to Cleveland State University Dean Bette R. Bonder, PhD, who began her career working with older adults as an occupational therapist and mental health counselor.

“There’s no question that activities that are stimulating and challenging can be gratifying and offer a way for older adults to convey a clearer sense of their identity,” she said. “But they also offer an opportunity to give back...to family and community. And for many older adults, that’s how they define successful aging.”

The impact art can have on physical and mental health is a major reason Cleveland State University (through Dr. Bonder) has become a key collaborator in the newly established Northeast Ohio Center for Creative Aging administered through the Benjamin Rose Institute ([www.neocca.org](http://www.neocca.org)). And it’s also why Cleveland State is sponsoring, in May, a creative aging conference – Design a Life: A community of ideas.

“The conference,” stressed Dr. Bonder, “isn’t just for professionals, it’s for anyone in the community who has an interest in creative activities.”

The holistic impact art can have on older adults is also the reason the Western Reserve Historical Society has scheduled its 8-week-long Creative Arts in the History Museum Program. Using the museum’s “artifacts” – everything from World War II airplanes to colorful horses from the carousel at Euclid Beach Park – as the focus of painting and drawing classes, the program aims to get participants “creating and discussing and reminiscing,” said Art Grady, the museum’s Public Programs Manager. (For more information on the Creative Arts in the History Museum Program, call: 216-721-5722, ext. 320)

It is hoped, noted Bonder, that the programs mentioned above and the new Northeast Ohio Center for Creative Aging will help trigger collaborations between the area’s health care community and arts organizations, because, said Bonder, the evidence that art can play a major role in promoting and maintaining health is definitely there.

“People are happiest and healthiest when they are engaged in activities that are gratifying and meaningful,” added Bonder, “and in so many cases, those are or could be art-related [activities].”

**For more information on creative aging:**

Arts and Healing Network  
[www.artheals.org](http://www.artheals.org)

Center on Aging, Health and Humanities  
[www.gwumc.edu/cahh](http://www.gwumc.edu/cahh)

National Center for Creative Aging  
[www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org)

Positive Aging Resource Center  
[www.positiveaging.org](http://www.positiveaging.org)

Society for Arts in Health Care  
[www.theSAH.org](http://www.theSAH.org)

*The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, Gene Cohen (2001)

*The Mature Mind*, Gene Cohen (2005)

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