Creative leisure opportunities

Jennifer Creek
39 Belmangate, Guisborough, North Yorkshire, TS14 7AB, UK
Tel.: +44 1287 630651; Fax: +44 1287 619310; E-mail: jennifer@creek152.fsnet.co.uk

Abstract. Creativity is a human characteristic that enables people and communities to adapt and thrive in changing circumstances. People spend the greater part of their lives engaging in a variety of activities that support health and well-being. Creativity can be expressed through many of the activities of everyday life, including work, family life, social interaction and leisure. When someone is unable to access a healthy range of activities, due to illness, disability or other circumstances, he will seek alternative ways of meeting his needs. For example, if a man is unable to work because of illness, he may choose to use his leisure time to express his creativity. Creative leisure activities can become an important part of an individual’s strategies for coping with illness or disability; through promoting adaptation, creating meaningful goals and providing distraction from pain and anxiety. If a person finds it difficult to engage in creative leisure activities, due to illness or disability, it may be necessary to provide practical support or to stimulate the individual’s own creative development.

Keywords: Creativity, leisure, disability

1. Introduction

Creativity is a uniquely human attribute that can bring great pleasure to each individual and that has been found to make a positive contribution to health and well-being. Everyone can enjoy having the time and resources to engage in creative activity, but it is especially beneficial for people who are deprived of a full range of activities due to illness, disability or other circumstances. A prisoner, separated from his normal activities by his incarceration, was introduced to creative embroidery by the volunteers of ‘Fine Cell Work’. He wrote: ‘How good it is to be alive, to feel that I am accomplishing something and that my life has real meaning. Nobody really enjoys an aimless life, a life without purpose, do they?’

This paper explores the nature of creativity and considers how people express it in different areas of their lives. It then looks at the impact of illness or disability on people’s ability to engage in creative activities and suggests ways in which creativity can be of help in managing a chronic health condition. Two ways of promoting creativity are proposed: facilitating access to creative activities and stimulating personal creativity. The paper presents a positive approach to encouraging creative expression through leisure activities, in people whose opportunities in other areas of life may be limited by impairment or other circumstances.

2. Creativity and creative activities

To be creative is to have the capacity to bring something new into existence, for example ‘a thought, a theory, a thing, a work of art’ [16, p. 119]. Highly creative people, such as artists or writers, are able to interpret their life experiences in fresh ways and turn them into original products that help the rest of us to see the world differently. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the theories of Sigmund Freud changed how we understand the nature of the human mind. This ability is sometimes called eminent creativity.

Only a few people are eminently creative but everyone has some potential for everyday creativity [4,7,15]. Everyday creativity is the ability to see new and effective ways of doing things or to find new solutions to problems. Creativity can be seen, therefore, as a necessary component of autonomous and purposeful action. When a person is unable to imagine possible actions or situations that are not directly motivated by the present circumstances, ‘he is firmly and solidly tethered to the situation which he perceives in a concrete manner and
he cannot step outside its confines’ [17, p. 269]. Every day creativity allows us to try out alternative ways of doing things in our imagination before we decide on a course of action, to generate new solutions to old problems and to make the best use of the conditions in which we find ourselves.

Creativity is a uniquely human characteristic [1]. Having the capacity to imagine alternative ways of behaving or alternative solutions to problems has enabled the human race to survive, to adapt to changing conditions and to thrive in most parts of the world, throughout history:

Human beings have a long history of applying their creative abilities to their personal and social survival in unceasingly new and interesting ways . . .

It is through this process that civilization in all its forms has evolved. (pp. 61–62).

Reynolds [10] reviewed evidence for the impact of the creative arts on health and well-being. She found that there has not been much research in this area and that most ‘is still at an early hypothesis-generating stage rather than providing any complete account of the effects of creativity upon health and well-being’ (p. 113). For example, 58% of the members of a university choir thought that their physical health improved due to singing. Many of them ascribed this effect to reduced stress and improved lung function, but the researchers did not attempt to verify these claims.

Creativity can be expressed in any area of human activity, including work, home making, child care, self care and leisure. Many of the activities of daily life can be used as vehicles for self-expression if they are approached creatively [3]. For example, self care can be carried out in a routine way or it can be used each day as a new opportunity to express personality and mood through clothes, make-up, grooming, accessories and personal style.

People are active beings who spent the greater part of their lives engaging in a dynamic range of activities; from the play and formal learning activities of the child, the courtship and competitive activities of the adolescent, the productivity and family centred activities of the working age adult, to the home and community focussed activities of the older person. One area of activity that is valued by people of all ages is leisure.

Leisure activities can provide the space for creative expression that may be lacking in other, more pressured areas of life. For example, a woman who looks after her large family finds the time to knit unique garments that she designs herself; or a young man who works as a filing clerk is a performance poet at weekends.

3. Disability, illness and creativity

When someone experiences illness or trauma, their opportunities for activity may be limited in more than one area of life, including work, self care and home. A woman with multiple sclerosis (MS) described a progressive loss of activities as the disease progressed [11]:

I’d hoped to go in for illustration, illustrate books. But at the time this (MS) was coming on and I was finding I couldn’t carry the folio. I thought I can’t go around London with a portfolio I can’t carry. Now I’ve got crutches, I can’t walk any distance without them so you really can’t carry anything. So I think you have to let things go.

It may become increasingly important to make use of leisure time for meeting personal needs that are no longer satisfied by other types of activity. For example, levels of activity and access to a range of activities have been found to be more important predictors of quality of life than the degree of impairment or disability in people with high spinal cord lesions [6].

However, participation in leisure activities can be affected by impairment, just as other areas of life are affected. For example, Wikström et al. [18] found that about two-thirds of people with rheumatoid arthritis had fewer leisure activities after the onset of the disease, and that loss of leisure activities was associated with dissatisfaction with quality of life: ‘there is substantial support for the assumption that a good quality of life is associated with a leisure time filled with meaningful activities’ (p. 90).

Some creative people are able to continue to express their creativity despite impairment, perhaps by changing the nature of their art medium. For example, a woman whose eyesight deteriorated in later life turned from fine embroidery to rug making. Others, who have not previously engaged in creative work, find that illness or
disability can be turning points that enable them to discover and explore their own creative potential. This can lead to a positive reappraisal of their priorities and self-image, leading to transformational coping [10]. For example, the famous painter, Frida Kahlo, 'began oil painting while confined to bed during a serious illness' (p. 101).

Creative ability can remain intact even when other functions have been disrupted by disease or injury. The neurologist, Oliver Sachs, described a musician, Clive, who lost his memory following a cerebral infection. His amnesia was so severe that it amounted to 'a deletion of virtually his entire past [and] new events and experiences were effaced almost instantly' [13, p. 49]. Despite Clive being left with a memory span of only a few seconds, his musical powers and memory remained almost perfectly preserved and he still enjoyed dancing. Indeed, music became the medium through which he could transcend his amnesia and feel wholly alive.

Reynolds [11] studied how women textile artists used creative work to reconstruct their identities during chronic illness. She found that many of the women took up creative activities as a way of coping with their anxiety about illness or of filling in unstructured time, such as during hospitalisation, and that creative expression then became an important component of their strategies for managing illness and disability. 'Textile artwork did not represent only a minor pastime or casual hobby for this particular sample. Instead, creative art-making had become central to living positively with illness.' (p. 123).

For people experiencing disability or chronic illness, the benefits of creative activities can include [2,11,12]:

- supporting a positive sense of self;
- promoting adaptation;
- giving a renewed sense of agency and control;
- filling the empty time left by medical retirement from work;
- enhancing status and achievement;
- providing distraction from symptoms and illness anxieties;
- creating meaningful goals;
- restoring a satisfactory self-image, and
- providing entry into new social networks.

Sachs [14] described a young woman, Rebecca, who had an IQ of less than 60 and who was clumsy and ill-coordinated. She was unable to live independently and was expected to attend a sheltered workshop during the day, which she hated. Eventually, Rebecca was enrolled in a theatre group where she was able to overcome her impairments and do 'amazingly well: she became a complete person, poised, fluent, with style, in each role' (p. 176). Rebecca found that she was able to engage fully with the creative aspects of drama, music and narrative in a way that was impossible in other areas of her life.

When access to leisure activities is limited by impairment, it may be necessary to assist people to overcome barriers and enable them to make full use of the creative potential of leisure. This can be achieved by giving support to facilitate access to chosen activities, or by providing conditions to stimulate or develop the individual's creativity.

4. Facilitating access to creative leisure activities

In order to offer opportunities for participation in creative leisure activities, it may be necessary to introduce the individual to activities that she has never tried before (Fig. 1) or to adapt familiar activities that she now finds difficult (Fig. 2). The way that an activity is introduced can strongly influence the likelihood of its being taken up.

It has been found that people are more likely to take up creative activities if the materials are readily available, for example art materials or an embroidery kit [10]. Starting with a small, simple item increases the likelihood of a successful outcome, which may stimulate interest in trying something more difficult. A woman with chronic fatigue syndrome described how her confidence increased as her skills developed [11, p. 124]:

"It [the nature of the occupation] definitely changed, from just doing little kits and things to making/designing things myself. So I’m definitely getting a lot more confident in developing my own skills."

Having a positive role model also influences whether or not someone will be willing to try a new creative activity: in order to release creative potential, the individual has to value the creative process. Depending on the needs of the individual, and his level of confidence, it may be more appropriate to start the activity in a one-to-one session or introduce him to a group. For example, after James McKillop was diagnosed with dementia, he was given one-to-one support to learn photography, which became the starting point for regaining his confidence and a valued social role [9].

Most adult education establishments offer courses in a range of creative activities, such as gardening, flower
Choose an activity that is within the person’s capabilities, perhaps by providing some adaptations or aids. For example, consider eyesight, mobility, manual dexterity, concentration span and cognitive abilities. If the person has difficulty understanding information or following instructions, find a more suitable format.

Begin with a short, simple project, perhaps in kit form, to give the best chance of success. Provide more structure and limit the amount of choice available at first so that the person can focus on learning the activity before having to make creative decisions.

If the activity is introduced in a one-to-one session, work alongside the person on your own project to present a positive role model, rather than simply instructing and observing.

Provide good quality tools and materials to increase the chance of successful outcomes. Ensure that all necessary information is readily available, including books, DVDs or audio tapes for instruction, reference or inspiration.

Help the person to find or create an appropriate space for the activity, however small. Ensure that there is easily accessible storage space for materials and work in progress so that the craftsperson can access her work easily. Suggest that the environment is made stimulating, with a variety of appropriate pictures, samples and materials on display.

If the individual is interested in meeting others who share the same creative interest, help her to find and access a local class or group.

Fig. 1. Introducing someone to a new creative leisure activity.

arranging, book binding, paper making, stained glass, pottery, dancing, singing, writing, photography and a variety of craft activities. Alternatively, if an individual already has some experience of the activity, there are groups to join, such as the Embroiderers’ Guild or a local group for painting or creative writing. Many towns have amateur dramatic societies that welcome new members in a variety of roles, from acting to front of house work.

It may be necessary to adapt an activity to overcome impairment. For example, good lighting and a magnifying glass may help the person with visual problems. Needle threaders or other simple aids can enable someone to work independently. Working for short periods of time can assist in managing fatigue, and deadlines should be avoided so that the individual can work at her own pace. Attention should also be paid to seating and posture, in order to reduce fatigue and pain. Ensuring that materials and work in progress are stored in an accessible location makes it easy for the craftsperson to take up the work with minimum effort.

If someone is attending a course or a group, there has to be a reliable means of transport that allows the person to get to the venue feeling relaxed and ready to concentrate. If the journey is too long or stressful, some of the benefits of the creative activity may be lost.

Many activities require some social interaction, for example when choosing and buying materials or during the activity. Limited communication skills can therefore be a barrier to participation that needs to be addressed, either by providing communication aids or through some form of advocacy.

5. Stimulating creativity

Although everyone has the potential to be creative, many people lack confidence in their own ability. Internal conditions that facilitate the development of creativity include believing in one’s own potential to be creative, being prepared to let go of old ways of thinking or of doing things, deferring judgement on one’s ideas while they are being worked out and being ready to try out lots of different ideas or ways of doing things [5]. Creativity may also be stimulated and developed by manipulating external conditions. These include:

- Creating a stimulating environment with a variety of attractive objects to look at and handle. This may be a room in the person’s own home, or part of a room, that is set up for the person to work in. “In some ways, perhaps, one’s physical environment
Begin by putting in place the least intrusive adaptations, aids or support: the level of assistance can be increased as necessary.

Adapt the:
- Method or technique, for example, hand building pots rather than throwing them on a wheel;
- Process, for example, working for short periods of time to assist in managing fatigue;
- Tools, for example, enlarging the handles of paint brushes so that they are easier to hold;
- Materials, for example, using ready cut lengths of rug wool rather than buying it in hanks;
- Environment, for example, installing good lighting to help the person with visual problems.

If necessary, provide aids to support the expression of creativity by enhancing basic skills, including:
- Vision, such as a magnifying glass;
- Manual dexterity, such as a non-slip work surface;
- Mobility, such as a wheelchair;
- Communication, such as a hearing aid;
- Memory, such as a row counter on a knitting needle.

Where possible, recommend aids that are readily available and socially acceptable, for example, magnifying glasses, needle threaders or left-handed scissors.

Pay attention to seating and posture, in order to reduce fatigue and pain.

If an assistant is used, ensure that the person understands his role as an advocate or support and does not contribute more than the creative individual wants.

If the creative individual is attending a course or a group, ensure that a reliable and affordable means of transport is available.

Fig. 2. Adapting creative leisure activities.

acts like a birth mother, providing the host entity and sustenance that enable creativity to be born and to flourish’ [7, p. 117].
- Providing good quality materials and equipment to increase the chances of a successful outcome. Even a skilled craftsperson finds it more difficult to work with poor quality tools and materials.
- Limiting the amount of choice available at first. When someone lacks confidence in his own creative ability, a more structured approach will help him to get started. As confidence and skill increase, more freedom and choice can be introduced.
- Stimulating flexibility of thought and response by withholding judgements and encouraging a free flow of ideas.
- Ensuring that people have all the information and instruction they need to complete the activity successfully. If a person has difficulty understanding information or following instructions, a format should be found that he can follow.

Levels of creativity are not constant throughout the lifespan but rise and fall at different times in people’s lives [10]. With encouragement and support, even the most disabled person can be helped to discover and develop his creative potential.

6. Conclusion

Participation in creative activities promotes health and well-being, and can have particular benefits for people who are coping with a chronic health condition. This may include distraction from pain or discomfort, a renewed sense of purpose in life and new social networks.

If an individual is experiencing impairment that limits his activities, it may be necessary to provide targeted
assistance to ensure that he is able to take up opportunities for creative leisure activities. Confidence grows as skills are developed, so it is important to provide the conditions that give people experiences of success.

The rewards of creative expression can be remarkable. As the psychologist, Abraham Maslow [8], wrote:

The creative person, in the inspirational phase of the creative furore, loses his past and his future and lives only in the moment. He is all there, totally immersed, fascinated and absorbed in the present, in the current situation, in the here-and-now, with the matter-in-hand . . . “Utterly lost in the present”.

(p. 5).

For a person coping with chronic or progressive illness, this total absorption in the present moment can be a great gift.

References


