

Museums and Activities

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Good information comes from many sources. For years, I have looked for research that would provide recreational activities personnel with some concept of exactly what types of activities older people prefer. I finally found a recent research article in a magazine for museum curators which I think is quite helpful¹.

The article not only provided research into what seniors want for activities, but also suggested that by contacting all your local museums and having them bring activities to your facility, you might offer significant advantages to your residents.

The article first recognizes that "although many older adults are healthy and active, there are challenges encountered by this group due to their advanced age." Events such as chronic illness, physical and cognitive decline, functional disability, reduced income, retirement, death of a spouse, social devaluation, and isolation all exert enormous strain on the mental health of older adults. The researchers reviewed 142 studies of "programs or interventions for the elderly in museums and non-museum settings."

Here are the findings of the most preferred and effective of these activity programs:

Reminiscence

Facilitated group discussions using boxes of older objects are used to start reminiscence discussions. All reminiscence programs involved the participants' discussing personal memories, sometimes using food or historic objects as reflection prompts. All boxes contained objects that could be manipulated, and some specifically incorporated multi-sensory elements such as sound recordings or fragrant items. Group discussion reminiscence programs involved multi-session offerings to fixed groups of participants. The number of sessions ranged from four to twelve, with eight sessions being the most common. Session lengths ranged from thirty minutes to two-and-a-half hours, with one-hour sessions being the most common.

Object-oriented Programs

These programs were similar in format to the reminiscence programs above, but without the focus on personal reminiscence. Themed boxes involved the use of objects in an outreach program such as Valentine's Day or doctor's tools. The Bowers Museum had nine themed boxes of artifacts used in hour-long presentations on location at senior facilities, and the Bruce Museum

offered one-hour outreach programs with objects, although their program specifically focused on patients with dementia.

Art Programs

Programs included tours of art museums (which now can be done through Skype live or through slides broadcast across the web), studio art classes, an art installation in a hospital, a group conference call to discuss artwork, and a multi-media program involving visual art, music, movement, and writing. One program combined art therapy and reminiscence in the creation of "life books". The latter is something we have recommended highly in order to both build resident self-image and enhance caregiver empathy.

Storytelling

Two storytelling programs were reported: Timeslips was a storytelling program offered twice a week to dementia patients in residential facilities. The program involved the participants telling creative stories based on photograph prompts, to help improve their communication skills. Prosjekt Eldrepedagogikk was affiliated with the University of Bergen. The storytelling groups of twelve older adults met every other week for a year, writing prose and poetry during and between sessions, and sometimes using stimuli such as memories, music, objects, or images.

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The most common outcome of the thirty-one reminiscence programs researched was enjoyment or mood improvement (39%), followed by increased socialization (29%), enhanced cognitive functioning (26%), improved wellbeing (10%), empowerment or increased confidence (6%), and improved physical health (6%). One study each found improved life satisfaction, perception of control, improved perception of health, increase in daily life activities, closure with the past, improved positive outlook, heightened verbal fluency, and improved relationships with caregiving staff.

My take-away from this research is:

1. If you have not called all local museums to ask for them to visit your facility, do so right away.

You need the programs, and they need favorable publicity and donations.

2. Start collecting physical reminiscence items. This might be done through having families or staff bring things from home or attend local garage sales. Just one old album cover of a Frank Sinatra LP can start thirty minutes of reminiscence.
3. Offer your facility to sponsor a garage sale in which you raise project revenue and have first dibs on the most memorable items.
4. Train your activities staff to introduce reminiscence items and then wait. Do not talk immedi-

ately. Sometimes it takes an older mind to make a comment but if your staff talks instead of listening, the benefit of reminiscence is lost. In discussions, it is the residents who should be talking. With seniors you have to wait for them to have time to collect and express their ideas.

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1. Christina Smiraglia; Targeted Museum Programs for Older Adults: A Research and Program Review; Curator, The Museum Journal, Volume 59, Issue 1 January 2016 Pages 39–54 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12144/full>