

Getting Creative: a project to improve well-being for all

Patients in a Newcastle memory service, along with their caregivers and clinicians, were given the chance of “Getting Creative” thanks to a project run by the charity Equal Arts.

Kate Parkin explains how it worked

We know that creative activity can enhance wellbeing and enable better communication between people with dementia, their care-givers and clinicians. But incorporating it into a busy NHS setting is often easier said than done.

As a creative ageing charity based in the north-east of England, Equal Arts has spent more than 30 years bringing creative opportunities to older people to help reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing. So, when we were approached by Dr Charlotte Allan, consultant psychiatrist with the Newcastle Memory Assessment and Management Service (MAMS), we were keen to see if there was a way we could work together on a project.

We came up with an innovative partnership to introduce arts-based activities into the service’s clinical pathway, funded by a Health Foundation Innovation for Improvement grant for which MAMS had successfully applied. A challenge we faced was that while creative activities have been shown to improve wellbeing and reduce stress in people with dementia and in their caregivers, they are not commissioned as a core part of NHS memory services.

Clinic staff have pressurised schedules leaving few opportunities for working creatively or focussing on their own wellbeing. During initial benchmarking surveys, they felt strongly that an outcome

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of the project should be to strengthen communication and build empathy between themselves and their patients.

Our charity operates in care settings and cultural venues to support professional artists to deliver creative workshops for residents and people with dementia with a view to promoting communication and wellbeing.

We developed a series of three “Getting Creative” groups for patients and caregivers at MAMS, each group running for eight weeks and being co-led by professional artists and clinical staff, who collaborated to introduce activities themed around creative language, cyanotype print-making, working with clay and glasswork.

Artist-led groups

Groups each comprised 12 people with dementia and their caregivers, two staff providing pastoral support, one creative writer who facilitated every session, and an artist. Different activities required different artists, depending on whether it was glasswork or ceramics or another art-form.

MAMS promoted the groups, which met once a week, with flyers and a

Project outcomes

- Increased post-diagnostic support for patients living with dementia, and their family caregivers
- Prioritisation of staff wellbeing at work
- Strengthened relationships between colleagues, leading to better patient care
- New opportunities for staff training, personal development and leadership.



increased their sense of wellbeing and confidence. They looked more relaxed, smiled and formed connections with their peers.

Memory clinic staff were also offered six creative sessions of their own with activities that mirrored those in the patient groups. Those staff who assisted in the patient workshops were able to find out in advance about the kinds of artistic techniques that would be employed in them. This helped with their resilience and wellbeing.

One staff session brought doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and administrators together to create poetry and glasswork that expressed their gratitude for working with each other and for being part of the lives of their patients.

Ownership from senior NHS managers resulted in more buy-in from staff, supported meaningful partnership working and provided a commitment to

personalised letter from the occupational therapist after they had received their diagnosis and first appointment at the clinic. Each eight-week series of workshops was followed by a four-week gap and then another eight-week series with a new set of participants. We wanted to give as many as possible of the 600 memory service attendees the chance to take part.

Workshops ran for two hours and included time at the beginning to reflect on the previous session and time at the end to reflect on what had just been said using creative writing methods. A tea break also gave participants an opportunity to talk.

A time for growth and renewal

Our intervention developed a new paradigm for patients and caregivers, one which foregrounded the idea that living with dementia can be a positive experience and a time for growth and renewal. Participants were proud of their creations, which





legacy. Once memory groups can reconvene and return to the building there are plans to support the continuation of creative activities within these groups. Presently patients have been offered Equal Arts Create at Home creative activity packs and access to online workshops.

Evaluation

The clinic purchased iPads so that photographic evidence and survey responses could be gathered from workshops. Simple surveys were created on the iPads and passed around during sessions. We wanted to find out how participants were feeling “in the moment” rather than retrospectively and responding could be as easy as choosing from a range of facial expressions from happy to sad.

A videographer also interviewed participants in each workshop series and the creative writer provided observational feedback after every session which fed into the final report. Staff completed their own evaluation using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWBS) among other methods.

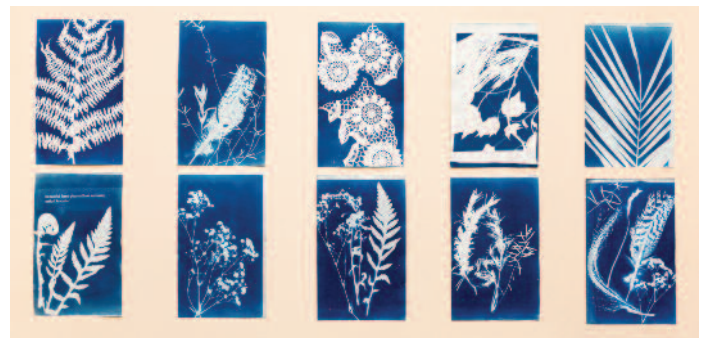
The findings were



overwhelmingly positive. It was pleasing to see patients, who had been nervous at first, find their voices and the ability to communicate with each other and make new friends through creative activities, such as moulding clay figures and making green glass bottle lamps.

Typical comments in their feedback were “I felt relaxed, involved and happy” and “It was a pivotal moment in his dementia journey and helped him accept his diagnosis and realise there is life after diagnosis.”

Staff sessions had a similar impact. They bolstered wellbeing by evoking a sense of autonomy, belonging and competence, and they encouraged joy at work. Staff



Creative work in progress, and some stunning results from the Equal Arts project with Newcastle Memory Service



had fun and described feelings of optimism and hope. Relationships between colleagues were strengthened in the workshops, which also allowed reflection on better communication and engagement with patients.

Many members of staff continued their learning through follow-up creative activity either in their own time or in ongoing memory group sessions with patients. As a whole the evaluation makes a strong case to explore alternative social prescribing options for patients and caregivers.

The project has had a long-term influence on the way the clinic runs its service and our hope is that it can be extended

to other services in the North East. There has already been interest from other hospital wards and clinics working with older adults and mental health.

Following the project, we’ve been liaising with NHS staff and patient experience coordinators to explore replicating and scaling up the model in other hospitals. We are determined to capture the tremendous energy fostered by the project to embed creative activities in post-diagnostic pathways right across the region.

Further information

See this three-minute video for further details about the project: <https://vimeo.com/383579168> ■