



Engaging in the creative arts to protect against cognitive decline



What is the focus of the research?

Designing evidence-based creative arts programs that help to maintain brain health and cognition in older adults.



Why is it important?

Physical activity is important for brain and mental health, and it helps people to remain socially connected. For older adults with restricted mobility or health conditions, the creative arts offer a promising and stimulating alternative.

Engagement in creative activities is associated with improved mood and wellbeing in older adults. However, we don't understand the specific brain mechanisms creative arts influence to improve peoples' cognitive wellbeing and quality of life, or how long they must engage in it before experiencing benefits.

Associate Professor English is going to find out. By comparing creative arts programs that require different types of skills – songwriting and art-making – she's hoping to pinpoint the unique and



Understand



Diagnose



Cure



Care

Research



Treat



Prevent



Delay

“

We're hopeful that unleashing our inner creativity can promote cognitive function and enhance the ageing experience. ”

– Associate Professor Helen English

common ‘ingredients’ that improve our brains’ neural, cognitive and emotional processes.

The results of this innovative study will form the foundation of a large-scale, multi-centre randomised controlled trial. The findings of that will inform the development of evidence-based arts programs that protect against dementia and cognitive decline, and improve psychological wellbeing, as people age.

When rolled out in aged-care settings, these programs will become valuable tools to promote healthy ageing, by improving important measures of brain health, mood and quality of life. Online versions of the programs will allow Associate Professor English and her team to deliver them to rural and remote areas, where access to healthcare is often restricted.



How will this happen?

Stage 1: recruit 72 people living in aged care to be randomly placed into either program, or a control group. Perform baseline assessments of neural activity, cognitive function and self-reported social and emotional function on all participants.

Stage 2: participants in the artmaking or songwriting groups to participate in weekly, one-hour sessions for 10 weeks.

Stage 3: re-assess all participants immediately following the intervention, then again 10 weeks later to determine if the benefits are short-lived or ongoing.



What will this mean for older people?

- An engaging and fun way to improve cognition.
- An evidence-based method to reduce the risk of dementia.
- Opportunities to increase social connection.
- The chance to develop new skills they might not have otherwise discovered.



How will the creative arts programs work?

Songwriting: this intervention will facilitate meaningful and active engagement by promoting collaborative creativity, as participants share their lives through songwriting. Participants will be encouraged to find commonalities among experiences and develop ways to tell their collective story through co-creating songs.

Artmaking: selected works of art with diverse themes and stylistic approaches will be used to prompt responses and shared life experiences. These shared responses and stories are the impetus for participants’ art making, using paints and collage materials to produce original works. Sessions will encourage multi-tasking, new learning, self-reflection and social interaction, as participants share their thoughts, feelings and memories around their art response.



Who’s undertaking the research?

Associate Professor Helen English, University of Newcastle

Helen English is an associate professor of music at the University of Newcastle. She is an Australian Research Council early career research fellow and leads a multidisciplinary creative ageing research group, supported by the Hunter Medical Research Institute.

In 2017, Associate Professor English received an Early Career Research Excellence Award from the University of Newcastle and an award from the National Committee of Women’s New South Wales branch for her PhD thesis, which has since been published by Routledge as a book. She is passionate about widening older adults’ participation in creative activities.

The title of Associate Professor English’s project is *Designing Evidence-Based Creative Arts Programs to Maintain Healthy Brains and Minds in Older Adults*.