

Theatre training can improve cognitive function and psychological wellbeing of older people

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Summary

This paper reports an experiment to investigate the benefits of an acting programme on the cognitive functioning and quality of life for elderly people in Illinois, USA. They found that those in the theatre programme made significant improvements in memory, problem-solving and psychological wellbeing when compared against participants in an art class and a control group. In follow-up tests the cognitive benefits to the theatre group were maintained four months later.

The study involved 124 adults aged 60-84

They were predominantly white, healthy, educated, and all were members of residential communities and recruited through local senior centres. A quarter of the participants were men. 44 people took part in the theatre training, 44 in visual arts training and 36 were assigned to a control group. Participants in both the theatre and art groups were tested using a range of standardised cognitive and wellbeing measures at the start and end of the programme. The control group also took equivalent tests the same time apart from each other, but did not engage in any programme in between.

The programme consisted of nine 90-minute sessions over a month

The theatre programme comprised tasks tried to 'get the participants to become so imaginatively involved in a dramatic situation that their behavior changed without conscious manipulation on their part' and to perform in front of each other in a supportive environment. The comparison art sessions comprised in-depth discussion of a number of artworks that were displayed around the experimental setting.

Why did theatre outperform visual art?

In trying to explain the different results between the three groups the authors speculate that it may be due to the mindfulness and intense application required in the theatre group that was not required from participation in the comparison art group.

Keywords

theatre USA experiment quality of life cognition visual art elderly wellbeing

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