

The Journal of DementiaCare

For all who work with people with dementia

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Celebrating the arts in dementia care

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Creative Space: enabling empowerment and joy

Shelley Hastings describes Resonate Arts' Creative Spaces — inclusive social sessions where people living with dementia and their carers feel welcome and safe to participate in a wide range of arts activities including print-making, film making, animation, clowning, physical theatre, improvisation, yoga, storytelling, poetry, movement therapy and performance art

Resonate Arts is a small charity that produces a pioneering programme of creative activities and experiences for and with people living with and affected by dementia in the London boroughs of Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea.

Resonate Arts' Creative Space groups are multi art-form, friendly and inclusive social spaces. They started in 2021 to provide artist-led sessions in local community spaces rather than in large arts venues, initially a monthly art group and now a weekly session at the Penfold Community Hub in the Church St ward of Westminster and a monthly session at Regent Hall on Oxford Street. The sessions encompass a whole range of arts activities, enabling our group members to work with exciting artist facilitators who have a diverse and eclectic range of skills. In the past few years we have explored: print-making, film making, animation, clowning, physical theatre, improvisation, yoga, storytelling, poetry, movement therapy and performance art.

At their heart, our sessions are emotionally, culturally and cognitively inclusive community spaces where people living with dementia and their carers can feel welcome and safe. Members' needs are considered and held, there is no pressure to participate, and people are able to just sit and 'be' if that is what is right for them that day. It is through this gentle person-centred approach that a transformation happens and creativity is given a safe space to flourish. Through support and modelling, group members understand that there is no wrong response or emotion, so they relax, feel stimulated and valued, connect with each other, create and learn together, and often try out something new. Friendships are forged and carers and family members have time to connect too.

Creative Space Art

In Creative Space Art sessions we use improvisation techniques as a guiding principle for the way we facilitate. This means we come in with a loose plan, but approach each session as flexibly and intuitively as possible and we take inspiration for the direction of the session from the creativity of our group members.

We follow the flow and see where it takes us. Each

Shelley Hastings is Projects Manager at Resonate Arts. To find our more contact Shelley or our Director Sam Curtis, at info@resonatearts.org or call 0300 030 7212.

Top tips for creating a Creative Space

- **Welcome** and emotional check-in at every session. Never rush the activity, make time to meet the group where they are.
- **Well supported sessions – volunteers are invaluable.** We work with an artist, projects manager and are supported by our brilliant volunteer Creative Befrienders which enables us to have the capacity to support multiple needs.
- **Follow the flow and be flexible.** Improvisational methods where you adapt and give agency to the group.
- **Give space for ideas to grow.** We believe everyone is creative, be open to ideas growing organically, give power to your participants, encourage experimentation and play!
- **Listening and wellbeing monitoring.** Be alert to the needs in the room throughout the session.
- **Check out and reflective debrief.** Make time to reflect after each session, both with group members and as a facilitation team. Use this learning to build relationships and inform future sessions.

session informs the next so the work grows organically with the interests of the group. People living with dementia often experience a loss of confidence and agency and our groups are a flexible environment where we give creative control to members, so that they are leading, creating and collaborating on work they have ownership of and can feel proud of. This process is empowering and joyful.

Over the last couple of years we have been running Creative Space Art at Regent Hall with the artist Georgia Akbar, who specialises in visual arts and film making, led by the ideas and narratives of the people she works with. This past year with Georgia we have been exploring using unusual materials, from fabric strips from her grandmother's old saris, to wire sculpture and torches to make shadow and light, to powder and spray paints that we have used to make stop-frame animation using accessible technology. The beauty of using unusual materials to create abstract art is



Creative Space groups encourage experimentation and play—a joyful and empowering process.

Photographer: Richard Gray



that the work is received on its own terms and can transform and be interpreted into many imaginative things. Members are not saying – ‘that doesn’t look right’ or ‘I can’t draw very well’, but instead - ‘These blues are like the sea at home in Mauritius’, ‘This is a tree but also a fish if you turn it sideways’. This encourages personal involvement, play and experimentation and builds a confidence that lasts long after the session ends:

I arrived and felt all ‘fussed up’ and then everything unravelled in the session in a good way. I feel wonderful, happy, content. Group member.

At a recent session we were experimenting with acetate and a laminator creating stained glass window-type hangings. One of our regulars took her work home with her and just a few days later called us:

I have just been in my living room with the panels we did working out where to put them, and they look absolutely gorgeous, they have filled my room with pink and purple light. Group member.

Other group members have taken materials home and worked independently or with family carers, bringing their finished creations in to share at the next session. The group is ever growing with incredibly diverse life experiences but the commonality is a generosity and kindness towards each other, a willingness to learn together and experiment and an appreciation of what each other creates.

This just gets better and better, we are a real gang now! Group member.

The first stop frame animation we made grew out of us talking about how we like to celebrate. We talked about the simple things that give us pleasure or things we could see in the art we were making. You can watch this animation here: [Summertime Celebrations \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SummertimeCelebrations)

These sessions and working in this way help me untangle things, helps me untangle my mind. Group member



Creative Space Movement

Our Creative Space Movement sessions came about after several of our choir members (Singing with Friends*) expressed a desire to do more of the free physical movement we had started to introduce to some of our choir rehearsals.

Inspired by this, in 2023 with funding from the Postcode Society Trust we began a monthly group at Penfold Community Hub. The movement in choir during singing was often spontaneous and improvised. We moved our bodies to the music in whatever way felt good, took cues from each other, and there was laughter, playfulness and joy. For the first block of Creative Space Movement sessions we worked with artist Edith Tankus, an experienced physical theatre facilitator and clown.

Our movement sessions always begin with the essential emotional ‘check in’. We often use a prop like a talking stick or a feather, going round the group and asking people how they are, how their bodies are feeling that day, anything to be mindful of or to share. The power of people listening and acknowledging each other and what it has taken to get to the room that day sets an intention for us to support each other throughout the session. Like all the work we do, it isn’t rigid, people are welcome to make an action or sound, or check in in the way that feels right for them. One of our regulars often bursts into song. At the end of each session we repeat this process with a ‘check out’.

Like Creative Space Art, each session has a loose plan. With Edith we began each session with gentle breathing and yoga inspired stretching, listening to songs chosen by the group (Bill Withers – Lean on Me and Culture Club – Kharma Chameleon are two favourites). We build a safe emotional space where members can feel relaxed before a gentle build-up to more improvised, imaginative places. We might go on an imagined journey, a walk in the woods, a night out on the town. Edith would start the physicality and movement and then take cues from the group about where we could go next, how we could move as one, mirror each other and rhythms we could play. Spontaneous movements are encouraged as well as partner and solo work. We use props like scarves or shakers, or theatrical hats, as ways of connecting and giving moments in the spotlight. The key to creating a safe space for improvisation to thrive is a deep listening from us as facilitators, being alert to the needs and



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creativity of members and the group in every present moment – this can sometimes mean letting go of an idea or splitting a group to work in smaller groups or even one on one when there are varying dynamics and needs at play. Flexibility is key and a willingness to follow where the group takes us.

I feel happy for this space today and this happiness has helped with my pain. I surprised myself with what I could do. Group member.

I feel like I have smoothed out the edges being here.
Group member.

In 2024, building on the success of the group, we secured funding from Westminster City Council to increase the frequency of sessions to weekly and we have been working with art therapist and project manager Katie Turnbull to run the sessions. We have three different blocks across the year with different practitioners sharing their expertise. This year we have worked with movement therapist Liwen Wang and performance artist and theatre maker Fauve Alice. We now have an established group of regular members who are flourishing, confident at moving and improvising together, and wonderful new group members from people living with dementia at Penfold Court.

Building community

One key thing that is central to building the Creative Space communities is the work that goes into building relationships all around it. Taking part in a session doesn't start and end in those two hours. We always call people to check in before and on the day of the session, we keep in touch when we have breaks, and take time if we are working with a new referral to get to know their needs and interests. We take great care to welcome people fully to each session and see them off home safely. Our members understand that at our groups there is no wrong way to join in, you don't need to be an expert, trained in the arts, or even consider yourself a creative person. We meet people where they are with kindness and compassion, giving space for them to be heard and respected and an opportunity to express themselves in a way that feels comfortable for them. This approach fosters a confidence in the emotional safety and acceptance in our spaces. As one of our regulars often says 'Remember, this is a non-judgemental space!' or another who says 'You don't have to pretend you are something you're not here!'

As the groups have grown, people have had the confidence to move between them, trying art or movement or singing for the first time, taking risks, experimenting and challenging themselves in a way that didn't seem possible at the time of their referral.

You have to understand I am experiencing things in my life that I have never experienced, and I'm 82! It's incredible. Group member.

Each Creative Space session is followed by a debrief and reflection with staff and volunteers. We follow these headings as a guide:

- **Celebrations** – what worked well, what flowed, who or what we want to celebrate
- **Clearances** – what was trickier, what was hard, what do we need to get off our chests
- **Desires** – what would we like to do, ideas for next time

** Singing with Friends is a choir for people living with dementia, their family members and carers run in collaboration with Wigmore Hall and The Royal Academy of Music.*