

The Art of Being Seen: Visual Expression in Dementia Care

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Abstract

This artwork offers a person-centred visual exploration of dementia care, emphasizing the importance of identity and emotional continuity despite cognitive decline. The image of a young girl with flowers covering her visual senses and head symbolizes the enduring self, while the floral imagery reflects a memory that is fragmented, evolving, and deeply personal, rather than entirely lost. By incorporating bold colours and themes, the piece reframes the aspect of living with dementia through a lens of empathy and humanity. This artwork contributes to the discourse on health and dementia by promoting relational approaches to care and emphasizing the significance of recognizing individuality, meaning, and personhood in those living with dementia.

Keywords: Dementia care; person-centered care; visual art; art therapy; emotional expression

The Work in Context

As a person who struggles to articulate her thoughts, art has been my way of expression. Through the use of vibrant colors and patterns, I aimed to depict the emotional journey of a person living with dementia. This painting (Figure 1) was created as part of my final project for a dementia course in my Clinical Integration class. The project focused on analyzing care strategies for dementia, and it sparked my interest in incorporating art into dementia care. The flowers represent thoughts and memories, and the butterflies symbolize guidance and care provided by caregivers. Through this painting, I show how we can visualize a person living with dementia beyond their diagnosis.

Dementia “is an umbrella term for a range of diseases resulting in problems with short-term memory and other cognitive deficits” (Amin & McCausland, 2024, p. 518). People living with dementia face a slow decline in their cognitive abilities. Even though the condition affects and eventually diminishes memory, language and daily functioning, the individual living with dementia remains a whole person. They have an identity beyond a condition. Caring for a person with dementia is not about fixing the challenges they face due to their condition; rather, it is about supporting them as the disease progresses and changes.



Figure 1. Bijoy, H. (2025). *Seeing beyond dementia* [acrylic on canvas]. Personal collection, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

The creation and appreciation of visual art can have a significant impact on people living with dementia. Wyatt & Boddington (2025) explored the effects of participatory visual art activities on older adults with cognitive impairments, discovering that anxiety levels dropped when participants engaged in painting. The authors elaborate that the act of creating art, rather than merely looking at it, provides people with a sense of control, and a chance to express emotions. This can be extremely valuable for those with dementia who may struggle with verbal communication. Similarly, Law et al. (2021) examined both the physiological and psychological impacts of observing visual art in healthcare and in the community. Their results revealed significant decreases in self-reported stress and reductions in systolic blood pressure. This suggests that interacting with visual art can foster emotional well-being and enhance physical health. Together, these studies emphasize the profound therapeutic advantages of both creating and observing art. They present helpful, no-pharmacological, person-centered strategies that can enhance comfort, reduce distress, and support holistic care for people with dementia.

Just a single brushstroke can reveal a huge amount of a person's inner thoughts and emotions. This makes art not just a hobby, but a kind of therapy that helps people find peace, ease their stress, and express themselves when words fail them. Even when memories of a person begin to fade, the essence of who they are remains.

Author Note/Artist Statement

Henen Bijoy is a third-year nursing student who is interested in the experiences of individuals facing persistent illnesses. Noticing a lack of research in dementia care related to the fine arts, Henen was inspired to create this piece of artwork and accompanying write-up.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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