



## Recreation & Leisure

### For Older Adults with Psychiatric Disabilities

*“Don’t sit there and think because you’ve reached a certain age, there’s nothing you can do.*

*” – Hikmah Gardiner (born 1929), mental health activist*

Older adults with psychiatric disabilities benefit, both physically and psychologically, from leisure and recreational activities. Age and mental health issues need not prevent an older adult from engaging in enjoyable activities that may enhance independence.

Taking part in productive activity after retirement is essential for good physical and psychological health, according to the Cornell University Retirement and Well Being Study (1996). Other studies have indicated that exercise can decrease symptoms of depression, and that regular physical activity can help prevent or delay the onset of certain disorders and conditions and improve the health of people who already have such disorders and conditions. A study by the National Institute on Aging showed that some 80-year-olds using walkers were able to switch to canes after doing simple muscle-building exercises for just 10 weeks.\*

Leisure and recreational activities can also enhance the social life of older adults with psychiatric disabilities. Social isolation is a major problem for many older adults, especially those who have psychiatric disabilities. A survey by the Tompkins County (Ithaca, N.Y.) Office for the Aging found that 19 percent of older adults interviewed had had no contact with anyone in the past week, and 22 percent had had only one contact. Studies have also shown that social isolation is strongly correlated with poor physical and mental health in older adults.

Older adults may encounter barriers to engaging in recreational and leisure activities. Some of the most common barriers are lack of money, lack of transportation, lack of age-appropriate activities, and lack of knowledge about available activities. Organizations such as senior centers and peer support agencies may provide information and/or assistance that can reduce or eliminate some of these barriers.

#### **GETTING STARTED**

First, decide what types of activities you enjoy or might enjoy. Consider activities you have always wanted to try as well as things you have done in the past – even in childhood. Make a list. Then write down why you have not been participating in these activities. Is it lack of transportation, time, a companion, or money? Are you not feeling well enough or never thought of it?

Select at least one activity from the list and write down some solutions, such as buddying up with a friend (perhaps one who can drive, if transportation is a problem for you), asking about transportation for older adults and people with disabilities, asking about senior citizen discounts, and researching what leisure and recreational activities exist in the community.



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#### SUGGESTIONS AND RESOURCES

**Make a new friend:** Build a relationship with one more person over the phone, over the fence, or down the hall. Mentor another person.

#### **Fitness:**

There are many fitness programs, offered by organizations such as the YMCA, that are specifically designed for older adults. Call your local YMCA or visit the national Web site at [http://www.ymca.net/programs/programs\\_for\\_older\\_adults.html](http://www.ymca.net/programs/programs_for_older_adults.html).

Contact your local parks and recreation department for programs including walking clubs, tennis, golf, and other such activities.

Certain Medicare health plans offer free or discounted memberships at some fitness facilities, and other options for older adults who do not live near a fitness facility. For more information, visit <http://www.silversneakers.com/Default.aspx>.

Exercise tips are also available from the following organizations: the American Heart Association at <http://216.185.112.5/presenter.jhtml?identifier=814>; the American Academy of Family Physicians at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20020201/427ph.html>; and "Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging" <http://weboflife.ksc.nasa.gov/exerciseandaging/toc.html>. Another resource for programs especially geared towards persons with disabilities and/or older adults is The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability: <http://www.ncpad.org/programs>.

#### **Walk:**

Walking is a great fitness activity that doesn't require any fancy gym equipment, just a pair of good walking shoes. Brisk walking three times a week for a half hour to an hour each time will help you maintain your heart, lungs, and vascular system in good condition, and strengthen your muscles and bones. Check with your local shopping mall about mall walking. Some malls open their doors early for walkers and, to encourage them, offer incentives including walking clubs, discounts, health checkups, and mileage rewards. To learn more about mall walking, visit [http://www.grandtimes.com/Tips\\_For\\_Mall.html](http://www.grandtimes.com/Tips_For_Mall.html). AARP also offers a walking program, Step Up to Better Health: <http://aarp.stepuptobetterhealth.com/default.asp>.

#### **Libraries:**

Local libraries offer a range of social opportunities, such as book clubs, movies, speakers, and other events. In most cases, the events are free. Libraries can also be a source of information on community events, groups, and organizations. Visit <http://www.publiclibraries.com/> to find a public library near you.



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#### **National parks, historic sites, and other places of interest:**

The National Park service offers discounts for older adults and people with disabilities. For more information, visit [https://pwrCMS.nps.gov/pwr/fees\\_passes.htm](https://pwrCMS.nps.gov/pwr/fees_passes.htm) or <http://www.recreation.gov/>.

#### **Join a senior center or retiree association:**

Your local senior center may provide a range of programs, from social activities to art sessions, meals and health screenings. Senior centers are a great place to socialize and also a way to stay active. For a list of senior centers and other such groups in your area visit:

<http://www.seniornet.org/php/lclist.php#USA> and <http://www.ncoa.org/content.cfm?sectionid=131>.

Another option is to join a retiree association. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is a well-known, respected retiree association that is “dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all as we age” (AARP, 2008). AARP provides important information to its members related to senior issues; it also advocates for the benefit of seniors. The AARP Web site is <http://www.aarp.org/>.

#### **Take a class at a local university:**

Some colleges and universities offer special classes for older adults at low cost. (In Florida, community college courses are FREE to senior residents.)

#### **Volunteer:**

Many seniors give back to the community by volunteering. One way to volunteer is through Senior Corps. Senior Corps will connect you to organizations based on your needs and skills. It currently links more than 500,000 older adults to volunteer opportunities. Find out more at <http://www.seniorcorps.gov/about/sc/index.asp>. Another gateway to volunteering is Oasis, which offers exciting opportunities such as an Intergenerational Tutoring Program. More information is available at <http://www.oasisnet.org/volunteer/index.htm>.

#### **Blog:**

Blogging, or keeping a Web log, has become very popular among seniors. Not only is it an exercise for the mind, it is a way to share life experiences with other people and engage in online discussions. According to statistics from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the use of the Internet by adults age 65 and older grew 47 percent between 2000 and 2004 (Fox, 2004, p.2). You could start your own exercise blog to help keep yourself motivated and motivate others. For more information, visit

<http://seniorliving.about.com/od/entertainmentrecreation/a/seniorblogs.htm>.



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#### **Engage in the arts:**

The arts and creative expression can promote healthy aging by providing opportunities to experience a new sense of control, satisfaction and empowerment while also giving individuals opportunities for social engagement. Interim results from a study on creativity and aging by Gene Cohen of The George Washington University Center on Health, Aging, & Humanities (<http://www.gwumc.edu/cahh/index.htm>) revealed that individuals in an arts program (including such activities as singing, creative writing, poetry, painting or jewelry making) reported better health, fewer falls and higher scores on each of the depression, loneliness, and morale scales than those individuals who did not participate in the arts program (Cohen, 2006).

The benefits of participation in community arts programs for older adults are also explained in "Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Toolkit" <http://artsandaqing.org/>.

To learn about arts programs for older adults in your area, visit the National Aging and Arts Program Directory <http://www.creativeaging.org/programs.htm> and Local Centers for Creative Aging <http://www.creativeaging.org/nccanetwork.htm>. The National Endowment for the Arts also provides information about lifelong learning in the arts [http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/artsnAging\\_top.html](http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/artsnAging_top.html).

Senior theater is another creative activity that is growing in popularity. In 1999, there were 79 senior theater companies in the U.S. According to the article "New Trends in Senior Theater," the number has grown to over 530 (Vorenberg, 2008). Senior theater allows for self-expression and is a good way to socialize. It also accommodates the needs of seniors. Script-in-hand performances are popular; these prevent the need for extensive memorization. For more information, visit the following sites:

<http://seniorliving.about.com/od/entertainmentrecreation/a/seniortheater.htm> and <http://www.vsarts.org>.

#### **Crafts:**

Knitting, crocheting, embroidery, quilting, needlepoint, cross-stitch, and scrapbooking are all activities that people may enjoy. If you do not know how to do these crafts, now is the time to learn. Your local craft store, guild, crafts club, senior center or the local parks and recreation department may offer classes.

#### **Brainteasers and puzzles:**

Brainteasers and puzzles are a fun way to keep your mind sharp. You can work on your local paper's crossword, put together a jigsaw puzzle, or try your hand at the popular puzzler Sudoku. AARP's Web site has links to many enjoyable games: <http://www.aarp.org/fun/puzzles/>.



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#### **Play tourist in your own community:**

Call your local Convention and Tourist Bureau or Chamber of Commerce and ask for information. Do not forget to ask about discounts and specific events geared toward older adults.

#### **Gardening:**

You do not have to have a plot of land. Consider container gardening by obtaining small pots and planting herbs and flowers, or join a garden club. You will find more information on gardening at the following Web sites: <http://www.unitedspinal.org/publications/action/2008/04/03/acce> and [http://www.ncpad.org/yourwrites/fact\\_sheet.php?sheet=244&view=all](http://www.ncpad.org/yourwrites/fact_sheet.php?sheet=244&view=all).

#### **Find a hobby:**

Model trains, planes, cars, and dollhouses are not just for children. Hobbies like these offer a way to be creative and engage the mind. Some model trains are small enough to set up in an apartment. Also, such hobbies offer the opportunity to join a club and socialize with others. Visit these sites for more information: <http://www.nmra.org/> and <http://www.ntrak.org/>.

#### **Collecting:**

Stamp, button, coin and post card collections take little space and provide opportunities to get out into the community.

#### **Travel:**

For travel ideas and resources, visit: <http://www.elderhostel.org/> and [http://projectaction.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ESPA\\_travelers\\_database&goShortcut=Go](http://projectaction.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ESPA_travelers_database&goShortcut=Go).

There are many ways for older adults with psychiatric disabilities to engage in leisure and recreational activities that are suited to their needs and interests. They can have fun while also improving their general health and overall well-being.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

Healthy Aging and Mental Wellness <http://www.healthyaging.net/mentalwellness.htm>

Mental health peer support centers <http://www.cdsdirectory.org/>

National Center for Creative Aging <http://www.creativeaging.org/>

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability <http://www.ncpad.org/>

National Senior Games <http://www.nsga.com/>

Positive Aging Resource Center [http://positiveaging.org/consumer/sc\\_volunteer.shtml](http://positiveaging.org/consumer/sc_volunteer.shtml)

UPenn Collaborative Social Enhancement Workbook

[http://www.upennrrtc.org/resources/view.php?tool\\_id=191](http://www.upennrrtc.org/resources/view.php?tool_id=191)



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\* Please remember to consult with your healthcare provider before engaging in any physical activity or exercise program.