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Creating Purpose and Social Connection Through Crocheting and Knitting

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### **Creating Purpose and Social Connection Through Crocheting and Knitting**

Two factors identified in populations that live the longest healthiest lives include having a purpose for living and good social connections (Buettner, 2012). When vision loss occurs, individuals face changes that affect their entire lives. For instance, loss of a driver's license reduces independence to go out where and when the individual desires, leading to limited opportunities to participate in social and leisure activities (Berger, 2012). Participation in leisure activities has been found to be a predictor of independence in instrumental activities of daily living (Chen & Chippendale, 2017). The role of the vision rehabilitation therapist (VRT) is to help consumers to adapt household, work, and leisure activities so that they can be completed safely, accurately, and independently (ACVREP, 2020).

Crocheting and knitting are leisure activities that have purpose. The result of the activity is a product such as a hat, scarf, or blanket that can be used and enjoyed. Additionally, handmade items are unique and often cherished by the ones who receive them. The time and energy expended is a labor of love that is also therapeutic to the one who made it. Johnson and Post (2017) assert that medical professionals should prescribe giving to others and volunteerism because they increase physical and emotional well-being, opportunities for social connections, and provide meaning and purpose to life.

Researchers have found that two or more hours of participation in creative arts each week results in increased well being (Davies et al., 2016). Over 3,000 knitters who were surveyed and who knitted three or more times per week, reported better mood (Corckhill et al., 2013). Additionally, those knitters who knitted with a group were more confident, had a sense of belonging, made new social connections, and were more likely to learn new skills (Corckhill et al., 2013).

Historically, individuals who are blind or visually impaired have been taught handi-crafts like chair-caning or weaving (Nordstrom, 1986). Vocational skills, like knitting and broom making, were taught at schools for the blind (Apple, 2006) and provided unique outlets for contributing to community needs (Welland, 2019). Today our expectations about possible occupations for the blind have broadened (National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, n.d.), while crafting skills are often considered leisure and, therefore, optional. However, crafting may contribute to the development of transferable skills; such as spatial relationships, dexterity, tactile ability, and problem solving (Montemurno et al., 2021).

### **Adapting Crocheting and Knitting**

As a VRT, I have encountered numerous consumers who desired to either learn or regain the ability to crochet or knit. I am skilled enough to do basic projects; however, as a busy professional, I do not have time to increase my skill. Since I am not an expert, I felt a little intimidated by my consumers, some of whom were experienced crafters.

Even with my limited crafting skills, I achieved moderate success by encouraging consumers to try their craft using worsted weight yarn, also called 4-ply—indicating the number of strands that make up the thickness, make a basic pattern and implementing low vision adaptations like increasing light and reducing visual clutter. Simple patterns suggested included a blanket using a single large granny square pattern for crocheting, and for knitting, I suggested a scarf or dishcloth made using a repetitive pattern.

Many experienced crafters remembered some basic patterns and the suggestion to attempt crocheting or knitting was enough to motivate them to try. Surprisingly, they were often successful, even without additional instruction or prompts from me. Once they had proved to themselves that it was possible to crochet or knit something basic, they wanted to try more

complex projects. When it came to helping them with particular stitches or more complicated patterns, I was unable to help.

Consumers who were discovering that they could be successful with crocheting or knitting asked me if I could start a group where they could meet other consumers to share techniques and patterns. My agency was supportive of the idea, and a crocheting and knitting group was born. The group met monthly for one and a half hours.

In getting started with crocheting, group members found using a size H or J hook with 4-ply yarn that was solid light-colored, maximized visibility and touchability. Thicker yarn and a larger hook, size K or L, was sometimes helpful for some individuals but was awkward for others who had not typically worked with bulkier materials. When first attempting crochet with limited vision, I suggested making the most basic stitch called a chain. Learners would practice the chain stitch until a row of stitches of even consistency, about 10 inches or more, was produced. Since yarn easily frays for new learners and is more difficult to work with, practice stitches were cut off, instead of pulling out stitches and reusing the yarn.

Group participants were also successful in knitting. Beginners used short, approximately 8 inches in length, size seven or slightly larger size eight straight knitting needles. To begin the instructor would put about 12 stitches on one knitting needle; this is called casting on. The learner would then be shown how to make the knit stitch and was instructed to knit a stitch in each stitch on the needle. At the end of each row, the learner would count the number of stitches to insure they had the same number that were cast on. Once a number of rows had been completed, about four inches in length, The learner might be taught other stitches, or started on a simple pattern. As with crocheting, the stitches needed to be even and practice attempts cut off, to avoid using frayed yarn.

For reading the patterns, I suggested to the group that we stick to patterns that were not complex, those that could be easily remembered and repeated. Once the group started brainstorming and experimenting, the idea of simple patterns caught on.

The most successful crochet pattern was the granny square. Several features of this pattern made it an attractive option. First, the pattern never requires the creator to crochet into another stitch. Unlike many patterns that go back and forth across a line of stitches, the granny square is made in a circle. The crafter works around the perimeter, building onto the center. Stitches are made in groups of three, making a fan shape, and the set of three stitches is made in the space between the fan shapes of the previous row. Another feature is that it can be made to be a small square or any sized square the creator desires. Small squares can be made and sewn together, or the creator can keep adding to the square to make it the size of a blanket. By making just one square, the project was simplified. Finally, although the pattern is simple, it can be varied by using variegated or changing yarn colors to make each project unique. Group participants created variations, which were displayed and discussed in the group.

The dishcloth pattern was found to be an easy pattern for beginning knitters. The dishcloth is knitted diagonally across a square. This pattern is achieved by casting on four stitches and adding one new stitch on each row until approximately 46 stitches are reached. At that point, two stitches are knitted together on each row to decrease the number of stitches to four.

One adaptive strategy used by most consumers was to hold the knitting needles, or crochet hook, slightly closer to the tip. This allowed for more tactile interaction with the stitches and, in the case of knitting, helped to keep stitches from accidentally sliding off the needle. To

keep yarn from rolling away, a container or box, was used. If contrast was needed for the light colored yarn, a dark tray was placed under the project.

When taking a break from knitting, consumers used caps, which can be purchased, to cover the tips of the needles and secure the stitches. Alternatively, knitting needles can also be stored with a rubber band connecting the two needles, about an inch from the tips. This keeps stitches from falling off the needle and, even when not in use, keeps the needles together. When storing crochet projects in progress, the loop was removed from the hook and stretched to be larger, at least fist-sized. If jostled, the loop is pulled smaller before pulling out completed stitches. To keep track of the crochet hook, it was woven through a section of the project, or through the yarn. Storing project materials so they did not get tangled with other projects was achieved by placing each project in a separate container, or plastic grocery bag.

Group participants were happy with their ability to make projects and wanted to share their creations with others. After brainstorming, the group decided to make baby blankets for a local crisis pregnancy center. The group received donations of yarn, which were used to crochet or knit the baby blankets; however, there were yarn colors donated that were not appropriate for this project. With skill and confidence increasing, working with the dark and variegated yarns was now possible. Projects expanded to include lap blankets, which were donated to local nursing homes. Several of the participants brought bags of projects to be donated every month, while others donated items more sporadically. One participant made an average of 20 lap blankets per month (Ashburn, 2002).

Projects expanded to include loom knitting projects and Christmas ornaments. A box of hats and scarves was collected and donated to an organization that was requesting those items. Christmas ornaments were donated to a group that packed boxes for military members serving

overseas. One group participant decorated a tree with the group's creations. The decorated tree was donated to the art museum, who was collecting trees decorated by various organizations.

### **Instruction for Beginners**

Using strategies that had worked well for consumers returning to a familiar craft, I attempted to instruct several consumers who wished to learn the craft for the first time. Some instruction was carried out in the group, while other instruction occurred one-on-one. Two strategies, used in one-on-one instruction follow.

One left-handed consumer wished to learn to crochet. Using a light solid-colored 4-ply yarn, I sat facing the consumer. We each had our yarn and crochet hook. I talked through each step as she watched, and then she attempted to repeat the steps. By sitting in front of her, I simulated the mirror image she needed. Since her project was in reverse, I was not able to fix her project. If she got confused, we cut off her attempt and started again. In this way, she successfully learned to make a granny square.

In another situation, I taught a new learner to crochet remotely through phone calls. Before beginning, I prepared samples of the progression of making the granny square. I taped these samples to index cards, which were accessibly labeled by number and several short descriptive words. The consumer had these examples to review as we worked by phone, and I had a list of the number and description of each sample for reference. In approximately four phone calls, I taught her while doing each step as I described it.

### **Discussion**

During group, I observed group participants assisting each other with patterns, learning new stitches or processes, and giving each other tips for living life after vision loss. One particularly touching moment happened between two consumers. One consumer stated that she

missed reading books to her grandchildren. The consumer beside her replied, well, when my granddaughter is over, I just tell her to bring the book to grandma. I tell her that my eyes are broken, so if she can tell me what is in the pictures, we can make up a story to go with the pictures. Although this conversation had nothing to do with crocheting or knitting, it was something on the consumer's mind, and another consumer had an idea to share. Organic conversations like this one may be just as beneficial as ones that happen in a support group.

Consumers who regained the ability to crochet or knit found that the activity opened doors for expanding their social networks. For consumers who learned one-on-one, the ability to crochet or knit helped to connect them with others. One joined a crocheting and knitting group at her church, and the other had friends and family who eagerly absorbed her into their crafting conversations. Some of the original group members joined other groups, like one that made prayer shawls at a local hospital, while another member made blankets for Project Linus. Whether crafting individually or in a group, consumers made many items that could be donated or given as gifts.

### **Summary**

Despite their vision loss, the crocheting and knitting group exceeded its mission to connect those who crochet and knit. It also served a much deeper need. The group offered information on adaptations for crocheting and knitting, provided social connection, and established a purpose that blessed others. Many young mothers, nursing home patients, and individuals serving overseas benefited from their handmade creations.

The suggestion that individuals could be successful in crocheting and knitting was a powerful influence motivating individuals to attempt these crafts. Tips gleaned from consumers, like using 4-ply yarn in light solid-colors and gathering a group of consumers to support each



other, were important factors that helped the VRT coordinate a beneficial activity. Keeping patterns simple gave participants early success and confidence. Once their confidence was restored, participants progressed beyond the simple projects to make them truly meaningful for both themselves and those who received them. The support they gave each other went far beyond their crafting knowledge. They learned to problem solve and felt purpose in giving back to their community.

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