

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Can Poetry Keep You Young? Science Is Still Out, But The Heart Says Yes**

NPR Health

February 20, 2017 5:03 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition

Ina Jaffe

Creating some form of art is commonly believed to help older people stay mentally and physically healthy. Scientific research hasn't quite caught up with that belief.

But that hasn't deterred the dozen or so older adults in Janet Hoult's poetry workshop. She refers to them all as "my poets." They meet weekly at the Culver City Senior Center in Culver City, Calif. Hoult is 80. Her eldest pupil, Ruth Berman, is 91.

Like everyone in the class on the day I visit, Berman's brought some new work to share. It's a sweet poem about a gift from her granddaughter, expressed in rhyming couplets.

"My jewelry that's real is hidden out of sight," she reads, "but my butterfly necklace, I wear day and night." Another member of the class has a more meditative piece. Terry Dicks' poem is about her spiritual struggles — her choice between "mud," as she puts it, and her quest for the place "where miracles flow and all rain is holy water."

Regardless of age or subject matter, everyone here is serious about becoming a better poet. Ruth Berman says she works on each assignment all week.

"As soon as I leave the class, I go home and all these thoughts come into my mind," says Berman. "I write and I rewrite and I write. I must do it about 30 times before I get it the way I want it to be."

You wouldn't guess, from Berman's cheerful enthusiasm, what led her to start writing poetry. She took it up just last year after her husband died.

"It was sudden," she says of his death. "Very sudden. And I knew that I had to keep busy in order to focus and live again."

Researchers say there's no scientific proof that poetry — or any other artistic pursuit — actually helps older people live longer or live better.

"We still have a long way to go in understanding physical health outcomes," says Sunil Iyengar, the director of research and analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts.

It would be great to know for sure, Iyengar says, because compared to other kinds of health interventions, engaging in the arts is pretty inexpensive.

But it can be difficult to study. Making art is a complex process. Sometimes it's done alone. Sometimes in a group. And singing might have a different impact than painting or writing.

"We're not talking about a pill," says Iyengar. "We're not talking about [testing] a device. We're talking about something that is so deeply embedded in our culture and our society, and that contains ... many factors."

So far, research findings on the relationship between the arts and health have been all over the map. A roundup of some 30 studies shows that while most found benefits, they didn't measure the same things. Some looked at physical effects, like fewer falls or less use of medication. Others looked at effects on the mind — like improved memory or decreased depression. Unfortunately, many of the studies had no control groups, and were often too small to draw meaningful conclusions.

Iyengar says federal agencies are now funding more rigorous research and the results are just starting to come in. The early evidence suggests that the arts have positive cognitive, social, and emotional impacts on older adults.

For Hoult, the leader of the poetry workshop in Southern California, the emotional sustenance she gained from writing her first poems was profound. That was in 1999, after her son was killed in an accident.

Poetry "helped me begin to focus how I felt about losing my son," she says. "When you lose, you also remember what you had before the loss. And so poetry allows you to begin to look at a relationship, at what was of value to you."

In Hoult's workshop, Marsha Wilde reads a poem expressing a sense of loss on a global scale.

"How many words for murder do we already have in our North American language?" she asks. "Are there enough? Should we invent more? Would we write better poems if we invented more words that mean destruction? "

It was a long poem and there was silence in the room when she finished reading it. Most of the poems that are read aloud here tend to be lighter. But that doesn't matter. The people in this room all support each other. Ruth Berman says she loves each and every poem and all of the poets, too.

"I find them all fascinating," she says. "I want to get up and hug each one of them. They bring me such joy."

Even though science can't yet tell us if this poetry workshop is improving Ruth Berman's health, it's clearly doing her heart a lot of good.

**Can writing poetry, or creating some other kind of art, improve the health of older people? Do you agree or disagree? Using evidence from the text, support your claim:**