

Expressive Therapies

Creating a safe and empowering space for equality with – race, gender, sexuality, age, economic status, cognitive, physical, spiritual needs and those living with mental illness – through trauma-informed care: music therapy, art therapy, dance/movement therapy, and psychotherapy, to improve health and well-being.

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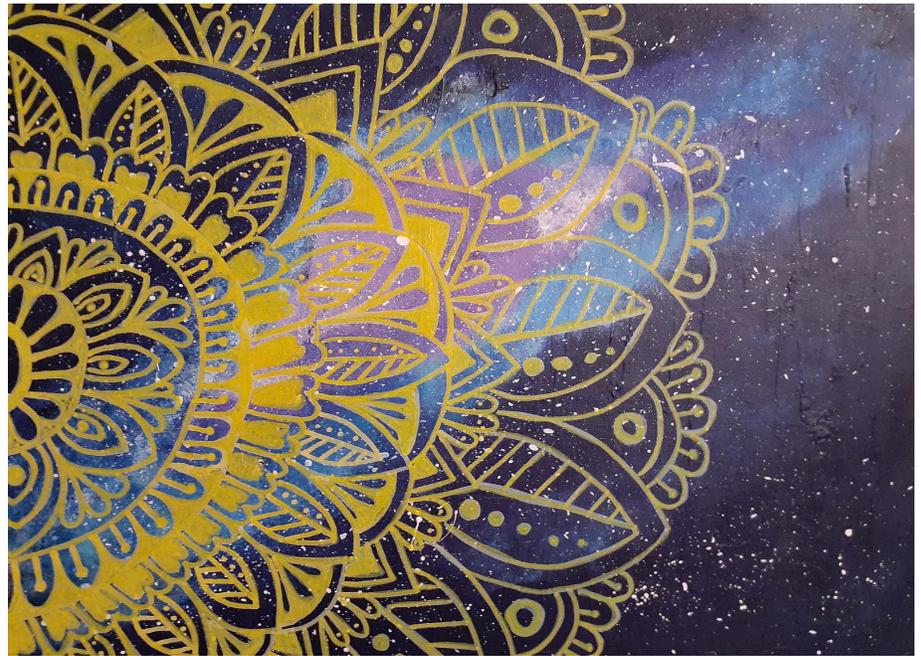
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Art Therapy and Oncology

Oncology is a medical practice setting where patients can benefit from creative arts therapy interventions and supports that are tailored to individuals with cancer. Our September 2021 newsletter, *Music Therapy and Oncology*, discussed how music therapy specifically can have a significant impact on the treatment and wellbeing of patients in an oncology setting. However, music therapy is not the only creative arts therapy approach that is effective and beneficial in the oncology setting. Art therapy presents unique opportunities and interventions that promote individualized, expressive therapeutic approaches that address the psychological, emotional, and physiological challenges that cancer patients and their families may experience. In this newsletter, we explore how art therapy addresses the goals and needs



that are most important to this population, and the ways in which it is an effective and evidence-based therapeutic approach to cancer care.

Oncology Treatment Areas – Reviewed

Oncology treatment is varied and separated into different areas, including: chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, and pediatric. These different areas are defined by different, distinct medical treatments for cancer patients. However, many of the goals and needs for patients participating in creative arts therapies may be similar across different treatments, but with emphasis given more to the priorities of that treatment area and the individual needs of the patient and their family.

Important goal areas for patients undergoing chemotherapy or radiation treatment include: management of pain and/or neuropathy, managing stress and anxiety, improving relaxation, relieving nausea, and social and emotional support both with or without other family or friends present. Surgery treatment goals for patients echo many similar goals as chemotherapy or radiation, with the addition of goals to reduce postoperative pain and anxiety, and increase satisfaction following a procedure. Pediatric oncology treatment involves addressing many of these same goals, but tailored to address the unique needs and presentation of youth and adolescent patients. Important goal areas for pediatric oncology also include providing a distraction for the patient, enhancing self-expression, minimizing isolation and loneliness of the patient, memory making, and sense of enjoyment and normalcy.



Goal Areas

The goal areas that are most relevant and important to oncology treatment will be affected by the area of treatment and the patient's individual needs and unique experience. The art therapist must assess and identify the individualized strengths, interests, and need areas that are most relevant to each cancer patient and their family. The goal sections below discuss some of the ways in which art therapy can effectively address and support patients during oncology treatment.

Pain and Symptom Management

Pain management is a significant area of concern for patients in chemotherapy, radiation, and pediatrics, as well as following surgery procedures. Studies show that art therapy effectively provides a distraction from pain, reduces pain perception, and improves pain management over a brief time post-treatment. Pain reduction has also been shown to be significant in both inpatient and outpatient treatment settings, especially during the period after engagement in therapy. Art therapy also enables patients to express, share, and represent their experiences of pain in creative ways, and therefore provides an outlet for processing a difficult and painful experience, both emotionally and physically. For pediatric patients in particular, but other oncology populations as well, art therapy can be utilized as a distraction to help youth and adolescents cope with pain by engaging them in a fun, creative experience that distances them from their immediate cancer experience. A variety of art therapy interventions may be beneficial for pain and symptom management, depending on what is most interesting and motivating for the patient.

Check it out!

Check out our September 2021 newsletter, *Music Therapy and Oncology*, for the following information about music therapy and oncology treatment settings:

- Additional information about different types of oncology treatment
- Benefits of music therapy for patients undergoing various oncology treatments
- How music therapy effectively addresses a variety of goal areas in the oncology setting
- Research and evidence supporting the use of music therapy in oncology settings

Physiological Responses

Physiological responses that may raise some issues for oncology patients include rapid breathing, rapid heart rate, and high blood pressure. These responses may be related to physical concerns, but often can be related to psychological concerns. High stress and/or anxiety stemming from the emotionally challenging situation can create significant, physiological changes in the body. Intentional selection and implementation of art therapy interventions that enhance a relaxation response—such as incorporating mindfulness—can help decrease stress and anxiety for patients, and by extension improve potentially escalated physiological responses related to stress.

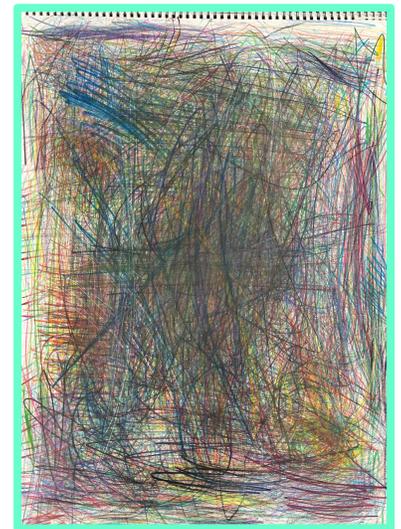


Examples: Pain/Symptom Management and Physiological Responses

- Increased focus on something else, like a preferred art medium, supports lower pain levels
- Homemade hand warmers, to help with patients' cold hands while undergoing chemotherapy

Stress Management, Relaxation, and Coping Strategies

A cancer diagnosis and cancer treatments can bring on a great deal of stress, anxiety, and/or depression that can be incredibly difficult for patients to cope with and manage, making stress management and ability to cope a highly significant goal area for this population. Stress, anxiety, and depression can snowball into negative impacts on physical (as described above), emotional, social, and psychological well-being, on top of the effects that are already present and directly related to the cancer diagnosis. Research shows that art therapy significantly reduces stress and anxiety, promotes relaxation, and provides a healthy outlet for coping with the challenges associated with a cancer diagnosis and treatment.



Examples: Stress Management, Relaxation, and Coping Strategies

- Body-mapping to explore how stress and anxiety are experienced in the body and support the mind/body connection in coping with stress
- Decorating stones (clear glass, smooth stones, etc.) and adding grounding words on the bottom as a reminder tool for relaxation, strength, and coping

Emotional Expression and Self-Expression

With a cancer diagnosis comes an array of complicated emotions. Patients may feel stressed, especially in the face of overwhelming information, changes, and decisions that happen over the course of their cancer experience. Patients may struggle with fear and anxiety about the future, or sadness, depression, and even grief regarding the losses and changes that are experienced by patients. Emotional expression and self-expression is therefore one of the most important goal areas for patients undergoing oncology treatments. Art therapy provides a creative outlet for these difficult emotions and experiences related to a patient's cancer experience, and it can be individualized for every patient to best meet their needs and preferences. Art is a powerful means for expressing and processing complicated emotions, and art therapists can support the psychological health and well-being of cancer patients through engagement in meaningful art experiences.

Examples: Emotional Expression and Self-Expression

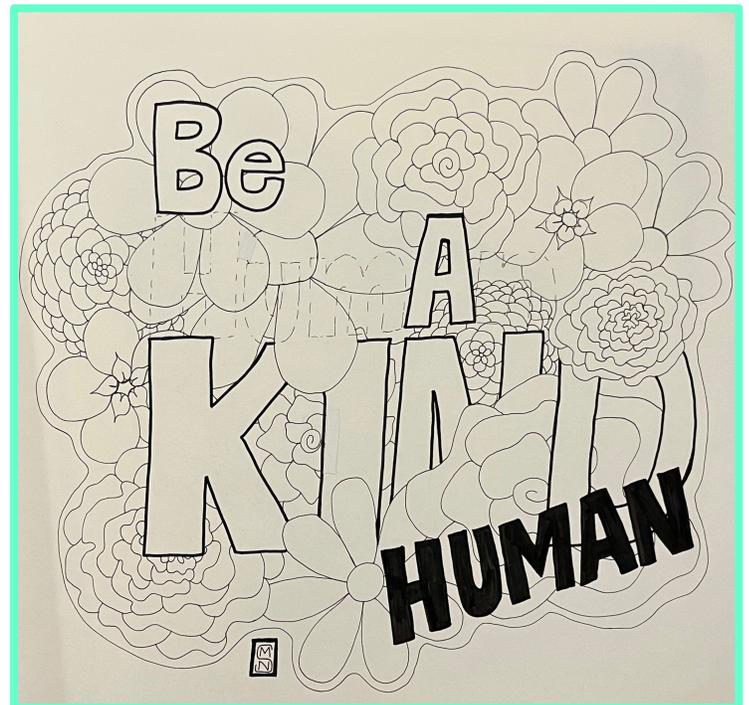
- Art-making prompt: What does your cancer look like?
- Magic Wand Prompt: What would you do if you had a magic wand?

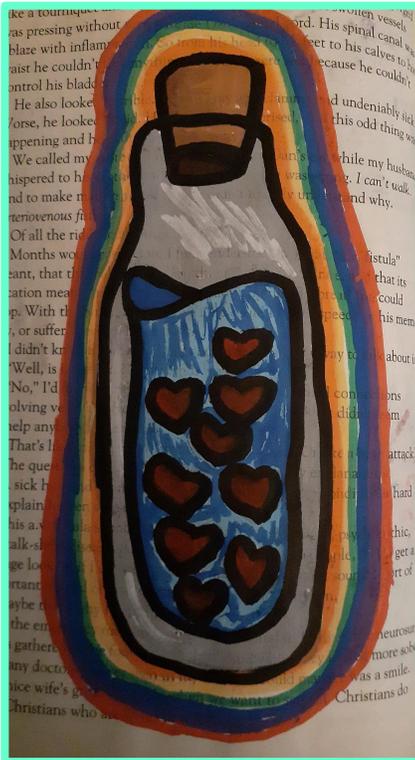
Communication and Connection

Art does not always have to be an individual experience and outlet—it also has the ability to bring people together and enhance social connections. Art therapy can provide a collaborative or community experience for patients and their families, one that may include exploration and expression of cancer experiences, but also brings connection through other meaningful and memorable connections that are non-cancer-related. Art therapy can promote quality of life, wellness, and social connectedness, all of which can be important goal areas for patients who may be experiencing immense disconnect and separation from their social relationships.

Examples: Communication and Connection

- Open art studio for patients and their families, with the option to engage in a specific art experience or to create something independently
- Patient art gallery





Self-Reflection and Exploration

Art therapy promotes self-exploration, reflection of experiences, and meaning-making. Art provides a creative way to reformulate one's sense of identity, process difficult experiences, and integrate meaning into a new view of identity and experience. A cancer diagnosis and oncology treatment experiences can be traumatic for patients, but art therapy can help patients to process, transform, and grow from these experiences. In this way, art therapy helps enhance personal growth and reflection for patients, in addition to emotional and psychological well-being.

Examples: Self-Reflection and Exploration

- "I am" poem with accompanying image creation to explore one's identity and what identity means to the person and to others who see them
- Self-portrait or Mask creation to express and explore how others may see the patient, compared to how the patient sees themselves, and how illness plays a role in that image

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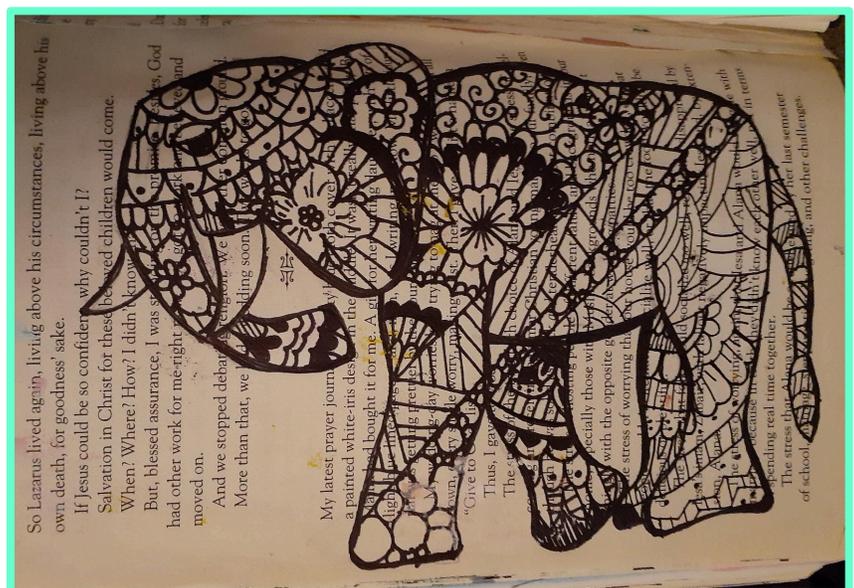
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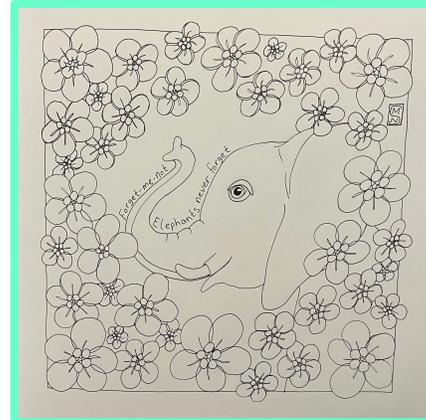
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THANK YOU FOR READING OUR NEWSLETTER!

We appreciate connecting with the community by sharing the specifics of music therapy, art therapy, and dance/movement therapy. If you have further inquiries, we highly recommend you visit our website at www.expressivetherapies.net, our Facebook page (Expressive Therapies), the American Music Therapy Association at www.musictherapy.org, the American Art Therapy Association at <https://arttherapy.org/>, the American Dance Therapy Association at <https://www.adta.org/>, or email us at info@expressivetherapies.net.

Take care and be well!

