



## Art therapies in cancer — A non-negligible beauty and benefit

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### ABSTRACT

Art therapy is a powerful tool involving the use of artistic ways of expression for physical and mental healing as well as the improvement of perception and cognitive functions. Art therapies are used to face the existence of life and death in serious diseases such as cancer, and visually express certain deeply-hidden feelings, such as fear and hope, by stimulating the memory. Through art therapy, cancer patients can express themselves with no need for talent, when they fall short of words<sup>16</sup>. The primary goal is to reveal the feelings of cancer patients and help them be happy: as psychoanalyst Jung says, “happy state is the creative state”.

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Emotional attritions are observed in patients and their relatives, as a result of concern, fear, anxiety, and questioning of life, which are commonly experienced in the quite difficult diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment stages of cancer.<sup>3</sup> Such emotional attritions observed in patients and their relatives may cause difficulties in the management of the treatment process as well as psychological stress in patients and their relatives, which results in reduced quality of life.<sup>21</sup> In cancer patients, pain, weakness, fatigue, hair loss, permanent post-operative scars, possible side effects of treatments, and permanent bodily changes caused by treatment failures affect the character of the individual; and on the other hand, the fear of death may lead to emotional changes, and loss of self-confidence. Excessively attritional processes may be accompanied by cognitive alterations.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, extremely effective medical and complementary therapies have been developed for controlling the symptoms caused by cancer and cancer treatment. Art therapies are among the complementary therapies intended for improving the quality of life of patients.<sup>23,3</sup> Cathy Malchiodi, one of the pioneers in the use of art therapies in cancer, has stated that art therapies should be tailor-made, and that each individual's specific psychological needs should be ascertained and then the chosen therapy should be planned accordingly. In studies conducted, the expectation from art therapies was to improve the quality of life of patients and their relatives, and positive results were achieved.<sup>15</sup> Art therapies includes art

disciplines such as music, painting, drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, dance, creative drama or writing.<sup>17</sup> Emotions and what have been experienced can be expressed more easily by using art— a kind of language—as a tool.<sup>9,11</sup> According to studies conducted, it has been observed to help emotionally strengthen people with physical or psychological disorders, by reducing their stress, fear and anxiety; and also to positively support the efficacy of their medical treatments.<sup>16</sup>

### 1. History of art therapies

The initiation of the use of art therapies in the treatment of diseases dates back to the time of ibn Sina, who lived in the 1000s, pioneered the development of medicine, believed in (and used) the therapeutical power of music. In the Ottoman period, music has been used as palliative care and a treatment method for the psychological healing of patients with various medical conditions, and its significant benefits have been observed on patients.<sup>5</sup> However, more recently Adrian Hill, a British artist and writer in medicine, defined art as “the enemy of diseases” in 1942.<sup>10</sup> Once Hill began to carry out studies on the therapeutic aspects of art, he observed that the artistic practices improved the psychological states of patients and reduced their stress. He administered art therapy to tuberculosis patients for the first time in 1945. With that study, the building stone of art therapy was introduced. According to Hill's approach, art therapy is intended to help treat psychiatric patients, mentally

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and physically disabled patients, cancer patients, and individuals suffering from physical discomfort.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Art therapies intended for cancer patients

The intended uses of art therapies in cancer treatment processes include the psychological improvement of patients and their relatives, and the improvement of their quality of life.<sup>15</sup> When we look at the historical process of art therapy, we see that different medias are used, and that different techniques have been developed in accordance with each of these techniques.<sup>16</sup>

Art therapy methods positively influence the midbrain, limbic system and the cortex, which are different parts of the brain.<sup>2</sup> Three-dimensional sculptures, ceramics and installations works appear to contribute to the development of motor activities and movements.<sup>2</sup> Using materials with different tissues and in different colors, sizes and forms for such works as much as possible increases the efficacy.<sup>7</sup> These kinds of artistic activities performed with three-dimensional perception can help both support physical healing and contribute to psychological healing.<sup>4</sup> Artistic activities involving the use of different three-dimensional materials provide healing by stimulating different feelings; and on the other hand, play an active role in increasing the awareness that is very important for cancer patients.<sup>20</sup> Research studies show that the awareness-based therapy method supports healing in the treatment process of cancer patients, by targeting stress and other psychological disorders.<sup>12</sup> Art therapies involving various techniques help cancer patients deal with problems that they commonly encounter, such as negative feelings and thoughts, stress disorders, chronic hyperactivity, problematic behavioral pattern, attention deficit and memory deficit.<sup>8</sup>

For cancer patients, the form of expression that involves the use of other colors is one of the best ways to express their feelings.<sup>22</sup> Art creation process enables the patient to both express his/her feelings and develop ideas.<sup>19</sup> When patients do these, the power of colors supports their form of expression and also improves their feelings. Besides its important role at the conceptual and symbolic level, the colors also consistently improve patients' ability to learn and improve some techniques, and solve analytical problems related to the process. This approach called conceptual and symbolic is not intended to ensure artworks to be aesthetic or with accurate pictorial quality; instead, it is intended to express intellectual dimension and a conceptual thing in the most simple and pure way.<sup>1</sup> While they give meaning to works of art at this level, they begin to perceive and discover different aspects about themselves through the creative process. A calmer attitude was observed in individuals, who regularly participate in the creative arts process, and on the other hand, it is observed that the blood pressure dropped as a result of the reduced stress, suggesting that the participation could indirectly contribute to the immune system.<sup>13</sup>

In a study conducted by the American National Institutes of Health to observe the effects of art therapy on cancer patients, different art therapy methods were used, and the effects of art therapies on patients were investigated. At the end of the study, the results showed that the art therapy process was significantly good for psychological complaints such as anxiety and depression, and that it contributed to the quality of life of patients.<sup>18</sup>

Each artwork created by patients is considered to be visual expression of the cancer disease experience. In this sense, visual arts help patients make their experiences visible.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the results of the studies, it can be said that the patients and their relatives, who felt happier, underwent the process of improving their feelings, thoughts and behaviors a little bit more easily. This effect of positive feelings on the human brain is an explanation of the "Broaden and Build Theory". Consequently, it is thought to contribute to creativity, problem-solving ability and

improved attention. It can also be said that while cancer patients and their families express themselves through art, their communication with themselves and others improve positively.<sup>21</sup> It is promising to see that the importance of the concept of quality of life in cancer treatment has increase in the last 50 years; and as a result, art therapies—one of the complementary treatment methods—became available at the leading cancer centers of the U.S., such as M.D. Anderson and Memorial Sloan Kettering, and such organizations began to be held in many oncology clinics in our country, as well.

## 3. Conclusion

Thanks to art therapies, cancerous individuals develop a way of expression by using creative and expressive methods through art, a kind of language, and can keep their physical and mental health better and more balanced, in comparison with patients not interested in art.<sup>18</sup> In the light of works done, art therapy organizations to be included in cancer diagnosis and treatment centers, which are founded by investing millions of dollars, will give color to the system, and enable cancerous individuals and their relatives to feel psychologically and physiologically better, in such a way as to help them improve their quality of life.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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