Art Therapy Benefits Cancer Caregivers

Making art increases feelings of pleasure and enjoyment while also reducing anxiety, perceived stress and burnout.

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Caring for a person living with cancer is no easy feat. But caregivers who are stressed can greatly benefit from coloring and open-studio art therapy, suggests a new study published in the European Journal of Oncology Nursing, reports DrexelNow.

Researchers compared the two arts-based approaches for caregivers with the help of 34 participants—25 health care professionals and nine family caregivers. The participants were randomly assigned to 45 minutes of independent open-studio art therapy or an active-controlled colored session; both were run by trained art therapists.

In the open-studio session, participants were given a variety of art materials to work with. The therapist would facilitate the session, offering guidance and interacting with each individual. During the last five minutes of the session, the art therapist processed the artwork before giving each person the chance to discuss his or her work and reflect on the process.

Those who participated in the coloring sessions chose a coloring sheet and were provided with markers and pencils. But in this instance, the art therapist didn't interact with participants.

Participants expressed feeling more pleasure and enjoyment and less anxiety, perceived stress and burnout after both sessions. In addition, many expressed an interest in continuing art-making in the future because it helped them focus on something else besides caregiving.

The researchers recommend that art therapy be made available not only to people with cancer but to caregivers and oncology professionals. Addressing their psychosocial needs not only improves their own health but also can improve the patient's treatment compliance and outcomes, notes lead study author Girija Kaimal, EdD, an assistant professor at the College of Nursing and Health Professions at Drexel University.

"We recommend that oncology units have similar, dedicated studio spaces with therapeutic support and different forms of art-making available to meet individual caregiver needs," she said.

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