

The art of cancer caregiving: How art therapies benefits those caring for cancer patients

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A cancer diagnosis is incredibly stressful for the person receiving the diagnosis. But those caring for the patient, both informally and formally, also experience stress, which can affect their own health and the patient's outcome. A study, led by researchers from Drexel University's Creative Art Therapies department in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, as well as researchers in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, showed coloring and open-studio art therapy benefits stressed caregivers of cancer patients.

"Families of [cancer patients](#) experience emotional trauma around the diagnosis, stress of treatment, financial concern, among others," said lead author of the study, Girija Kaimal, EdD, an assistant professor in the College of Nursing and Health Professions. "While addressing their needs understandably comes second to the patient's needs, the stressors families experience often go unaddressed."

Kaimal also added oncology professionals, such as nurses, therapists and physicians, experience their own set of negative effects, like compassion fatigue and not taking time for self-care. This can lead to avoidance of empathetic care, mistakes in patient care, high turnover, health problems and burnout.

As important as their own health is, addressing the [caregivers'](#) and oncology professionals' psychosocial needs also helps to improve the patient's treatment compliance and outcomes.

The mixed-methods study, supported through a cooperative agreement with the National Endowment for the Arts Research Labs program, was conducted in Penn's department of Radiation Oncology. Researchers compared two arts-based approaches for caregivers—single sessions of coloring and open-studio [art therapy](#).

A total of 34 caregivers (25 healthcare professionals and nine family

caregivers) were randomly assigned to 45 minutes of an independent, open-studio art therapy or an active-control coloring session, with all sessions run by trained art therapists.

A variety of art materials were available to participants in the open-studio session. The art therapist facilitated the session, offering guidance and interacting with the participant. With five minutes left in the session, the art therapist would process the artwork created by the participant, giving them an opportunity to discuss their work and reflect on the process.

In the coloring session, participants chose a coloring sheet and were provided with markers and coloring pencils. The art therapist did not interact with the participant while they colored.

Before and after each session, participants were given surveys to self-report their positive and negative feelings, such as stress and anxiety. After both the art therapy and coloring sessions, participants expressed increases in positive affect, pleasure and enjoyment and decreases in negative affect, anxiety, perceived stress, and burnout. Many expressed a desire to continue to make art in the future, as taking time out of their busy schedules to engage in art helped them to focus on something other than their caregiving.

These findings suggest that even brief art-making interventions can be beneficial for stressed caregivers of cancer patients. The study's senior author, William Levin, MD, an associate professor of Radiation Oncology at Penn, also points out that creative activities like art-making are mindful practices, allowing patients and caregivers to stay in the moment, which by definition can free them from the stress that cancer brings.

"These results show the importance of treating the mind as well as the

body of cancer patients, and it is further evidence that we're on the right track as we continue our push toward a more holistic approach to cancer therapies," Levin said.

Penn recently opened a dedicated multi-purpose room to expand its ability to offer these kinds of interventions to patients, something the study's authors point out is now further supported by science.

"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," said Kaimal.

More information: Girija Kaimal et al, Outcomes of art therapy and coloring for professional and informal caregivers of patients in a radiation oncology unit: A mixed methods pilot study, *European Journal of Oncology Nursing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ejon.2019.08.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejon.2019.08.006)

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