

Arts, medicine combine to help patients with chronic digestive symptoms

January 29 2024



Credit: The Ohio State University

In a study led by a team at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and Ohio State's Wexner Center for the Arts, patients suffering from digestive symptoms were prescribed participation in an art program designed to help ease stress associated with their chronic illness. The study, called Project Gather, used the combination of gallery art

exhibits and installations, hands-on activities and music to decrease the sense of loneliness among patients living with digestive symptoms like nausea, vomiting, bloating and pain.

Subhankar Chakraborty, MD, Ph.D., a digestive disease expert at Ohio State Wexner Medical Center, and medical student Anjali Doshi, worked alongside Tracie McCambridge, director of art and resilience at The Wex. Chakraborty enrolled 17 patients in the program, and McCambridge facilitated group activities and discussions at the museum. The study looked at how group engagement with the arts over eight weeks could impact patients' perceptions of their own well-being while living with chronic illness.

"It is very important to recognize that chronic illness comes with underlying stress," said Chakraborty, also a clinical assistant professor of internal medicine at Ohio State College of Medicine. "Stress drives the severity of chronic illness, and with the shortage of access to timely mental health care, I think it's important to have these kinds of activities that foster creativity and can ease stress."

"Some of the feedback we received from the patients was a deep appreciation for being able to connect with others who truly empathize with their experiences living with [chronic illness](#)," said McCambridge. "It's my hope that programs like this not only help connect them through similar lived experiences, but also connect them in a fun, engaging and stress-free way."

Study participants ranged in age from 32 to 97 years and nearly all (94%) were women. The group met once a week from September through December 2022. The research team observed a correlation of personality traits with the severity of digestive symptoms. Loneliness was associated with a poorer physical quality of life, while the severity of irritable bowel syndrome and gastroparesis correlated with a poorer

mental quality of life. Overall, the researchers determined that programs to improve loneliness and decrease anger may help ease symptoms.

"Meeting the participants where they are and designing programs that are sensitive to their social and [cultural background](#) is important," said Chakraborty. "Ohio State has so many disciplines and so many different specialties and subspecialties that I think we are uniquely positioned to develop this."

The team is hopeful to continue group programs like Project Gather for patients suffering from other illness and for populations like military veterans and other communities.

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Arts, medicine combine to help patients with chronic digestive symptoms (2024, January 29) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-arts-medicine-combine-patients-chronic.html>

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