



## ART THERAPY TO FIGHT CANCER\*

*ARTETERAPIA NO ENFRENTAMENTO DO CÂNCER*

*TERAPIA DEL ARTE PARA ENFRENTAR EL CÁNCER*

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Art therapy is the therapeutic use of an artistic activity in the context of professional relationships, with people affected by diseases, traumas or who seek personal development. Then, this study aims to report the experience of art therapy activities with a group of patients and their caregivers in a university hospital. This is an experience report conducted in Fortaleza - CE, from September 2010 to February 2011. Forty-nine people participated in the meetings, who performed activities using the methods of art therapy, such as: painting, cutting, drawing, collage, creative visualization and color therapy. In the assessment moment, the participants demonstrated that the intervention allowed them to talk about both the life process and the cancer fight. One concludes that the techniques of art therapy provided self-knowledge, self-esteem and well-being, through relaxation, besides promoting happiness and reducing stress.

**Descriptors:** Art Therapy; Nursing; Group Structure.

A arteterapia é o uso terapêutico da atividade artística no contexto da relação profissional, com pessoas acometidas por doenças, traumas ou que buscam pelo desenvolvimento pessoal. Com isso, este estudo tem como objetivo relatar a experiência de atividades de arteterapia com um grupo de pacientes e seus acompanhantes em um hospital universitário. Relato de experiência realizado em Fortaleza - CE, no período de setembro de 2010 a fevereiro de 2011. Participaram dos encontros grupais 49 pessoas que, utilizando os métodos da arteterapia, realizaram diversas atividades, tais como: pintura, recorte, desenho, colagem, visualização criativa e cromoterapia. No momento destinado às avaliações, os participantes descreveram que a intervenção permitia dialogar tanto o processo da vida quanto o enfrentamento do câncer. Conclui-se que as técnicas de arteterapia proporcionaram autoconhecimento, resgate da autoestima e a sensação de bem-estar, por meio do relaxamento, além de promover felicidade e reduzir o estresse.

**Descritores:** Terapia pela Arte; Enfermagem; Estrutura de Grupo.

La terapia del arte consiste en el uso terapéutico de la actividad artística en el contexto de la relación profesional con personas afectadas por enfermedades, traumas o que por buscan el desarrollo personal. Así, el objetivo fue relatar la experiencia de actividades de terapia del arte con grupo de pacientes y sus cuidadores en hospital universitario. Relato de experiencia, en Fortaleza-CE, Brasil, de septiembre de 2010 a febrero de 2011. Participaron en reuniones 49 personas que realizaron actividades, utilizando los métodos de la terapia del arte, como pintura, corte, dibujo, collage, visualización creativa y cromoterapia. En las evaluaciones, los participantes describieron que la intervención permitió el diálogo acerca del proceso de la vida frente al cáncer. Se concluye que las técnicas de la terapia del arte proporcionaron autoconocimiento, autoestima y sensación de bienestar, a través del relajamiento, además de promover felicidad y reducir el estrés.

**Descriptores:** Terapia con Arte; Enfermería; Estructura de Grupo.

\*This research is part of PIBIC-UFC "Facing death and dying in a general hospital" from the extension project Integrated Research and Extension Project in Loss, Grief and Separation - PLUS\*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Art therapy is the therapeutic use of artistic activities in the context of the professional relationship with people affected by diseases, traumas, or other psychological problems by seeking personal development. The development of art and the reflection about the processes and artwork encourage people to broaden their knowledge of themselves and of others; increase their self-esteem, cope better with physical and psychological symptoms, stress and traumatic experiences; develop their physical, cognitive and emotional skills and enjoy the moment provided by art making<sup>(1)</sup>.

In art therapy, there is the adoption of teamwork due to the possibility of individual and collective growth. Thus, the group therapy process allows individuals to awake to unknown and/or unconscious subjects, discuss, reflect and transfer to life knowledge that will help them to be agents of their own health, during or after the period of therapy<sup>(2)</sup>.

Group work is a general concept that refers to what happens within it, during the life of every individual who constantly seeks to preserve his identity. However, it includes not only the content of what is said or done, but also the way in which members interact with each other and their relationship with the leader. The primary advantage in group composition is the fact that a variety of people with similar problems or goals are working in mutual support and sharing common experiences. These, in a gathering, often have therapeutic value, because the relationships experienced, in some way, affect the individuality of each one of them<sup>(3)</sup>.

Usually, in the hospital environment, conventional therapies have the intention to attend the illness, not covering holistic care to the sick person. However, it is known that the fundamental principle of nurse education is focused on individualized care for human beings, to meet their biopsychosocial needs and not only on the

sick body, in contrast to the biomedical model, in which the diagnosis is more valued than the person.

In other words, nurses need to be emotionally involved with patients and their caregivers, whether they are family members or not, in order to maintain a genuine relationship. This involvement is vital in the therapeutic relationship, as it promotes empathy and allows the professional to know the patients better and to meet their needs, without harming their work at certain moments, for the development of the therapeutic relationship<sup>(4)</sup>. Then, humanized care enhances human relationships to promote feelings of pleasure, trust and mutual respect. Thus restoring people's desire to live and take care of themselves.

During the teaching and learning process in the academic education, one observed countless times, patients in hospital environments with little or no expectations of developing artistic or playful activities. Feelings of sadness pervade their daily lives, for several reasons, such as idleness and adaptation in a strange place other than their natural environment, in which the emotional and family ties are broken and their protective barriers are exposed to a disease process and to death. Thus, downtime causes anguish, fear, low self-esteem and little socialization, due to the permanence in a lying position, besides the silence<sup>(5)</sup>.

Because of this problem, patients with cancer and their caregivers during hospitalization led the group Integrated Project for Research and Extension in Loss, Grief and Separation - PLUS<sup>+</sup> to conduct this intervention, using as a strategy, in the conduction of groups, the art therapy. With the aim to reduce idleness, create bonds of integration and interaction between people, in inpatient units and make the hospital a less unhealthy environment, with better coexistence and harmony.

PLUS<sup>+</sup> was created in 2000 and is connected to the Department of Nursing and Extension from the Federal University of Ceará, composed by Nursing, Medicine and Psychology undergraduate students. It has as a major objective the dissemination of topics related to thanatology through the development of action research, experience reports, psycho-oncology, mourning and suicide therapies for people with cancer and their caregivers. In its thirteen years of existence, this project has conducted several activities such as courses, events, research and publications, reaching an audience of nearly one thousand and two hundred individuals.

Regarding these considerations, the reflection in this article is conducted aiming to report the experience through art therapy activities with a group of patients and their caregivers in a university hospital.

Thus, it is believed that the use of art therapy enables a paradigm shift, regarding the health promotion in hospital environments.

In this sense, this study is relevant and can be an important contribution to nursing in its practice of care for cancer patients, because it is still scarce the conduction of activities with art therapy approach in this area.

It is evident that the hospital working routine brings moments of wear for health professionals, when one often underestimates the co-participation ability of patients in improving their health. Thus, it is emphasized that the promotion of health through fun activities, becomes possible within the hospital environment<sup>(6)</sup>.

## METHOD

This is an experience report, with the use of art therapy, performed in the cancer ward of a university hospital in the city of Fortaleza - Ceará, conducted from September 2010 to February 2011. To participate in the study it was necessary for participants and

accompanying people who were in the oncology sector to be active, lucid and accept to engage in the activities. One also excluded the ones who were bedridden and in isolation due to their low immunity during chemotherapy treatment. In total we had 49 participants in this study.

The group meetings with art therapy activities were conducted by undergraduate nursing students from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC), guided by nursing professors and therapists specialized in art therapy and massotherapy. They were held weekly, with an average duration of one hour, divided into three phases, the first began with the presentation of the facilitators and participants; the second consisted of the explanation and implementation of the proposed art therapy; and the third one aimed at the evaluation, when members reported their feelings about the activities.

The group process was recorded in a field diary as a tool for collecting the information reported by participants. To achieve the objectives of each activity (increase self-esteem, facilitate self-awareness and relaxation), one used the methods of art therapy, such as: painting, cutting, drawing, collage, creative visualization, the mirror technique, chromotherapy, clay therapy, meditation and massotherapy.

Data analysis occurred with the creation of frameworks, composed by the number of participants, gender represented symbolically, goal to be achieved, art therapy method used and results found. The discussion was based on studies relevant to the topic.

The ethical issues were based on the Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council<sup>(7)</sup>, and the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under protocol nº 019.04.09.

Participants signed a free informed consent form. Everybody had guaranteed their anonymity and secrecy, and it was also ensured that at any moment they could choose not to participate in the art therapy activities, without harming the process.

## RESULTS

The study started with the insertion of nursing students in the hospital field. The oncology area of the hospital was divided into two rooms: one consisted of four wards, each of them with two or three beds, pleasant and with good light and the other by three separate wards with air conditioning, which did not allow the entry of companions and demanded the minimum possible flow of people, because patients were undergoing chemotherapy, had low immunity and requested specific care.

The activities were carried out only in the four wards in which one could enter easily and had the participation of 49 people, including patients and caregivers. The professionals of the area demonstrated

to be warm and considerate when presenting the unit and the patients. Under no circumstances during the development of the art therapy activities the participant was questioned about his diagnosis, because this was not the focus of the study.

After the first group activity, the team of coordinators realized that they would have a long way to go, but they were sure that each moment would be rewarding for their professional and personal growth.

After knowing the place and the first impressions, activities involving self-knowledge, self-esteem and relaxation were developed, as highlighted in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Number of participants	Objectives	Methods	Results
3♀	Possible interaction among coordinators and participants.	Cutting / Pasting	They made name tags related to what they liked to do: makeup, washing clothes, cooking, sewing, taking photos, teaching students, taking caring of babies and the elderly.
3♀	Recall thoughts about who they are.	Drawing	They drew birds, representing thoughts of peace; the person is happy for seeing himself as an outgoing human being, who is happy and helps others. A person did not participate in the activity for not remembering what she liked to do.
3♀ 3♂	Recall facts in stages of life.	Creative Visualization Cutting / Pasting	In childhood, playing with dolls and eating chocolate. In adolescence, going out, chatting with friends and dating. In adulthood, marriage, having children, going out with friends, going back to school, working hard, buying a car and living well with her husband. In old age, an elderly person recalled the birth of her granddaughter.
4♀	Recall their characteristics.	Cutting	Cutting out pictures of animals related to each participant's personality. Butterfly: because they like freedom, to be free to fly through the paths of life. Fish: because they like water very much. Lion: due to their strength and because they get everything they want. Dogs: due to their intelligence.

**Figure 1** - Description of the art therapy activities to stimulate self-knowledge. Fortaleza, Brazil, 2010

In Figure 1, one observes that the objectives were achieved when they enabled the interaction, valuing and elevation among coordinators, participants and their caregivers in the wards. Thoughts about the

experienced reality were recalled, and the reports showed that memory facts from every stage of life were recalled.

Number of participants	Objectives	Methods	Results
3♀	Recall positive moments.	Therapeutic Painting	Moments of joy, like harvesting and planting in the fields, taking care of cattle, being with their children. One participant failed to report any joyous moments. They mentioned relaxation and great pleasure when performing the activity.
3♀	Recall moments of happiness.	Creative Visualization	They visualized happiness in important moments, like being with their family, taking care of their grandchildren, being in a farm, being healthy, being out of the hospital and feeling that they did not have cancer anymore.
3♀	Recall the future after discharge.	Creative Visualization	Willingness to go to church, to love their husbands, to talk a lot with the loved ones, to listen to music, to go back home, to serve God and to be happy.
3♀	Awake appreciation of themselves.	Mirror technique	They reflected about how important they are. They felt surprised and thrilled. They realized that they should take more care of themselves and give more value to their potential.

**Figure 2** - Description of art therapy activities for increasing self-esteem. Fortaleza, CE Brazil, 2010

Figure 2 shows that the increase in self-esteem was one of the factors that stood out in the proposed activities, by registering the rescue of positive moments

and happiness, and wishes for the future. There was also encouragement for these people to be in touch with their life during their illness, seeking to find some important aspects that could recall future plans.

Number of participants	Objectives	Methods	Results
3♀	Recall positive thoughts.	Chromotherapy	Feeling in their room, at home, for being a beautiful location; taking care of people they love, longing for life outside the hospital.
3♀	Promoting relaxation through contact with clay.	Clay therapy	They reported having a great experience, especially the pleasant sensation that clay gave their bodies and minds during the activity.
4♀	Recall feelings.	Creative Visualization	How they feel in situations they've chosen, such as sightseeing and being with family or friends; getting late somewhere; having lunch with the family; sharing moments with important people in their lives; fighting with their families.
2♀	Recall inner peace.	Meditation	They felt happy and light, as if floating; tranquility and harmony.
3♀	Feel every part of their bodies.	Massotherapy	Feeling good and relaxed, and, for a while, forgetting the problems and the world out there and remembering that they were sent by God to help others.

**Figure 3** - Description of art therapy activities for the development of Relaxation. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2010

Table 3 shows that the relaxation was decisive as a practice of art therapy for the benefit of everyone, and the goals were to bring more lightness and tranquility, when they remain in the hospital, even in conditions of disease or accompanying a family member.

It is noticed that, typically, in the hospital environment, these practices are not carried out, which can cause even more stress in times of hospitalization. The relaxation favored moments of peace and balance to the participants.

## DISCUSSION

When performing activities that involve self-knowledge, one realized the importance of applying the method of collage, which is self-expressive, when the artistic creativity of the patient flows through the pictorial representation<sup>(5)</sup>. It also supports the vision and the reflection of their "selves", because, through the act of choosing, cutting and pasting, individuals have an identity, especially when they choose a certain picture

among many others, demonstrating their way of thinking and feeling, thus reflecting their tastes<sup>(8)</sup>. This was observed when one proposed the development of name tags, when identification would be in their name and taste for doing things (makeup, sewing), for everybody to know that.

Drawing as an art therapy method aims to activate the form, the accuracy and the development of attention, concentration and coordination, as well as to consolidate the thoughts and practice memory. It also relates to motion and object recognition with the objective to order<sup>(9)</sup>. Thus, one can see that the drawing shows not only what they want, but what the person really is or how the person is feeling at that moment. Like in the report of a participant who drew a bird to represent thoughts that convey peace.

As for the activities that elevate their self-esteem, the method of painting acts as the facilitator in the process of expression and freedom of the human psyche. The painting also helps in the communication of feelings, thoughts and emotions, and it allows people to express themselves creatively<sup>(10)</sup>. These ideas corroborate the participants' speeches when they recall moments of joy, as being with their children, and feeling pleasure and relaxation when painting.

All these methods have generated sense of satisfaction because patients felt happy for creating something that they wanted to express and eager to prove the results of their creations.

In relation to the development of art therapy activities for relaxation, there is the creative visualization, which is the practice of inwardly imagining the course of a scene or the targets of an action. Therapeutic visualization is essential to work with creative brain areas of images. Those positive forms have such an important therapeutic role. In this method, everything is symbolic and has the power to arouse pleasant emotions, causing improvements in mood and motivation<sup>(11)</sup>, such as the account of a participant who

reported a pleasant feeling for imagining he was in his room, when at that moment, he was in a totally different environment.

Another method of relaxation is imagining colors, the color therapy, which is based on the seven colors of the rainbow. Yellow promotes vitality, green activates cleaning, blue, the muscle relaxation. One recognizes that the chromotherapy and meditation help control the side effects of a conventional treatment<sup>(11)</sup>.

Clay therapy is a natural method to promote care with the therapeutic use of clay, which is an earth material composed of various types of minerals and has a high absorption capacity, especially for being able to absorb vibrations, harmonizing the energy field<sup>(12)</sup>. It was observed by a participant who reported a pleasant feeling that the clay gave to her body and mind, during the proposed activity when it touched her. This feeling can be interpreted as the reorganization of the vital energy of the body, where there is an energetic rebalancing.

Massotherapy is the manipulation of soft parts of the body, through touch, for therapeutic purposes and in order to rebalance and reorganize the organic and energetic functions. One realizes that experiencing moments of relaxation, forgetting the everyday problems, through a professional or even someone who is willing to offer it as a demonstration of care or even self-touching, can be considered a practical alternative<sup>(13)</sup>. This can be seen in the accounts of those involved in the massotherapy activities, when they touched their bodies, they had a good and relaxing feeling.

Through art, due to the interpretation and reflection of the experiences in the therapeutic relationship, people start getting their own content, knowing themselves and thus becoming active subjects in the therapeutic process<sup>(14)</sup>.

Therefore, art therapy work promotes the transformation of people from a mere passive condition

of receivers of a huge amount of images, to an active and expressive position of their own subjective world. Thus, one considers art therapy as a new proposal for therapeutic intervention<sup>(15)</sup>.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

One observed with the accounts of the participants and accompanying people, that the use of art therapy in the hospital environment, rescued healthy aspects, such as: remembering past memories in a more harmonious way, giving positive meaning to the illness, recalling stages of life, among others.

One can confirm that with the development and planning of group sessions within wards of a hospital, one can treat a greater number of people facilitating interactions and integration of patients and caregivers with serious diseases like cancer.

The experience of the practice of art therapy could highlight that simple and inexpensive methods such as painting, cutting, drawing, collage, creative visualization, color therapy, clay therapy, relaxation, meditation and massotherapy with recyclable materials can bring positive references to the lives of people who are exposed to conditions of oncological disease and their caregivers in a hospital. It also provides self-knowledge, self-esteem and a sense of well-being.

Using hours that are considered as idle, when there are no activities to be performed, one provided benefits such as joy, vision of future and desire to change to individuals who are physically ill, who often had unfavorable prognosis.

One considered that this study was of great importance because it is an experience report, in which art therapy is highlighted as a method that may help to improve the quality of life of patients with oncological disease and their caregivers in hospitals. It may also be included as a strategy in the planning of nursing care, as it shows that the use of this technique facilitates the

dialogue between patients and their caregiver, to cope with the disease.

### COLLABORATIONS

D'Alencar ÉR, Souza AMA and Araújo TS contributed to the creation, analysis, interpretation of data, drafting of the article and final approval of the version to be published. Beserra FM, Lima MMR and Gomes AF contributed to the drafting of the article and the final approval of the version to be published.

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