

# drawing a picture of health

by Cathy A. Malchiodi, ATR, LPAT, LPCC

Did you know that picking up a pencil to doodle or making a figure out of clay can help you to relieve stress, depression, and fear, and can even help diminish pain or other physical symptoms? Art therapy uses simple art activities to help people express themselves and develop a sense of well-being through the creative process. Expressing oneself through a drawing, painting, sculpture, or collage makes our thoughts, feelings, and ideas tangible and communicates what we sometimes cannot say through words alone. Through working with art materials, learning new skills, and developing ideas through visual media, often people feel a sense of self-satisfaction, personal achievement, and accomplishment.

Across the U.S., art therapy programs offer creative activities to lymphoma patients and their families to help reduce stress and anxiety, lessen pain and nausea, and empower both the patient and caregiver to express their feelings and experiences. Creative expression has been shown to naturally calm the body, reduce blood pressure, and even release chemicals in the brain that decrease illness-related depression. Opening up through artistic expression can improve one's outlook and mood, but most importantly, helps us to communicate our experiences of illness, trauma, grief, and loss.

Even if you believe you cannot draw a straight line, you have the capacity to use the creative process for health and well-being. Health benefits of drawing, painting, and other art making activities come from the process involved in creative expression, not the product. You do not have to be

an artist to enjoy and take advantage of art's powers to enhance wellness.

Art therapists are health care professionals who are specifically trained to work with a variety of patient populations, including those with medical illnesses. They utilize a variety of art media (such as drawing materials, paints, collage/mixed media, and clay sculpture) and the creative process to help individuals explore issues, interests, concerns, conflicts, and feelings through art expression. In hospital settings, art therapists work with people with lymphoma and other cancer patients of all ages. Often, art therapy is brought to bedside, but in many hospitals, there are inpatient and outpatient groups available. Cancer wellness communities and cancer support groups may offer art therapy for both pediatric and adult patients.

Families of the person with lymphoma can also benefit from therapeutic art activities to help them express feelings about their experiences as caregivers, parents, spouses, or siblings.

Art therapy can give you another avenue of communication of feelings, thoughts, and experiences and can help you to use your own creativity to increase your sense of well-being. If you don't have access to an art therapy program, here are some simple art activities that anyone can do at home or at the hospital:

**Buy a small sketchbook** (several sheets of paper in lieu of a sketchbook will do) and a set of felt drawing pens. Try using just colors, lines, and shapes to describe how you are feeling today. Or, simply doodle, scribble, or draw whatever comes to your mind. Don't be concerned with what it looks like; after all, there will be no grades! Just

have fun with the materials and see where your creative process takes you. Try to draw something in your sketchbook any time you feel stressed or anxious—you just may find yourself feeling a little less tense or worried.

If drawing does not stimulate your creative juices, **collect magazine pictures, postcards, and photos** that are soothing to you. Using scissors and glue, make a collage of your images on a large sheet of paper or cardboard. Hang your creation in your hospital room or home where you can see it and enjoy the images you have selected.

When you don't know how to describe your symptoms or feelings to your doctor, try **drawing them in your sketchbook**. If you have pain or nausea, keeping a visual record of when they come on may be helpful to share with your health care team. Bring your drawings to your next appointment and "show" your doctor what is difficult to describe with words alone.

If you are the friend or family member of someone with lymphoma, **bring them an "Art Rx Box."** Go to a local department or art supply store and buy a small sketchbook, colored pencils or felt markers, a watercolor set, gluestick and scissors and place them in a colorful box or basket. Include a copy of this article along with the materials.

Many hospitals have art therapy, activity therapy, or complementary medicine departments; check with your hospital to see if art therapy services are available. For information on medical centers that provide therapeutic art programs for their patients and art therapy programs in your area, please contact LRFA.

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