Art Therapy as a Resource for Improved Quality of Life and Emotional Wellbeing in Cancer Patients

Maneera Chopra, MS4
Abstract

• Art therapy blends a therapeutic approach with art-making processes to improve overall well-being, especially in cancer patients. A literature review was conducted to determine the efficacy of art therapy in improving quality of life in cancer patients. From the analysis a majority of studies showed a significant decrease in anxiety, depression, and cancer related symptoms like fatigue and pain. There was also a significant improvement in quality of life or well-being. Further research and robust studies are needed to determine which types of art therapy benefit patients most.
Introduction

- Art therapy is a clinical field established late 20th century
- Improves emotional well-being by using visual and creative arts like drawing, painting, pottery-making, and collage with psychoanalytic approach
- Targets symptoms like anxiety and depression
- Can help with coping and communication strategies
- Patients with cancer often deal with emotional distress and inadequately treated pain
- Studies show art therapy can help patients with cancer cope with diagnosis and symptoms
The primary thesis of the review is, “Art therapy has a positive impact on emotional experiences and quality of life in adult patients with cancer.”

Thesis formulated based on previous literature evidence showing reduction of anxiety and depression symptoms in mood disorders and other medical conditions.

Goal of the study is to provide recommendations to clinicians about art therapy as a complementary intervention to increase quality of life in cancer patients.
Methods

• Search conducted on PubMed, PsycInfo, and Scopus databases using broad search with the terms “art therapy”, “art therapies”, “cancer”, “cancers”, and “oncology”

• Studies published through October 2019 were included in the analysis

• Clinical trials, non-randomized trials, and randomized control trials included as a part of the review

• Systematic reviews analyzed separately from prospective trials

• Trials excluded if qualitative or narrative, did not utilize art therapy, did not enroll cancer patients, enrolled children or adolescents, or did not measure quality of life or mood
Literature Review/Results

• Anxiety and Emotional Distress
  • 11 out of 19 studies (57.9%) found significant decrease in anxiety symptoms after art therapy
  • Survey scales used to measure anxiety included HADS, ESAS, STAI, GSI, etc
  • Bar-sela et. al (2007) reported greater reduction in anxiety scores with more frequent art therapy sessions
  • Some multivariate analysis show no difference in anxiety with art therapy interventions when patients are controlled for demographic variables such as gender, age, education, and socioeconomic status (Geue et. al, 2017)

• Depression and Low Mood
  • 12 out of 19 studies (63.2%) showed significant decrease in depression and low mood
  • Almost all other studies showed clinical improvement in depression
  • Typically assessed by same scales that assess anxiety such as HADS and ESAS, as well as HDRS and POMS
  • Similarly to reduction in anxiety, patients experienced greater reduction in anxiety with long term interventions
Literature Review/Results

• Quality of Life (QoL) and Well-being
  • 8 out of 13 (61.5%) studies reported significant increase in quality of life or well-being
  • Measured by comprehensive scales such as EORTC, FACT-G, FACIT, etc which then converted individually into a numerical score
  • Bozcuk et al. (2017) determined a greater improvement in quality of life in patients naïve to art therapy or with lower baseline QoL scores
  • Monti et al. (2013) reported significant increase in social functioning and emotional health immediately after intervention and long term at 6 weeks after intervention

• Cancer Related Symptoms
  • 9 out of 17 studies (52%) measuring changes in cancer related symptoms showed significant decrease in symptom severity
  • Symptoms such as fatigue and pain were most commonly assessed although others such as shortness of breath, insomnia, appetite, and nervousness also reported
  • Coping skills, relaxation, body image, and concentration levels also measured with conflicting results
  • Two small randomized control trials (Jang et al., 2016 and Rhondali et al., 2012) reported significant decrease in fatigue
Appenix 1: Edmonton Symptom Assessment Scale

Please circle the number that best describes how you feel today:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nausea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep Disturbance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appetite</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scoring:
Total score: Depression: 0-7 = Normal; 8-10 = Borderline abnormal (borderline case); 11-21 = Abnormal (case)
Anxiety: 0-7 = Normal; 8-10 = Borderline abnormal (borderline case); 11-21 = Abnormal (case)
Discussion

• Several limitations in studies
  • Small sample sizes
  • Lack of randomization and/or control groups
  • Differences in survey scales
  • Gender bias (more women than men participated in most studies)
• High diversity in patient populations
  • Benefits of art therapy reported in patients from United States, Sweden, Germany, Japan, Korea, Israel, and other countries
  • Patients with lowest quality of life baselines benefited most
  • Differences in patient experiences, views on life, cancer types (breast and hematological malignancies most commonly studied)
• Variation in interventions used
  • Some studies used one intervention such as painting therapy, while others used multiple art forms
  • Differences in duration of therapy sessions (30 minutes to several hours) and number of sessions (1 session vs several sessions over weeks)
• Overall majority showing clinical or significant improvement in anxiety, depression and quality of life in cancer patients
Conclusion

- Art therapy shown to contribute significantly to improvement in anxiety, depression, quality of life, and cancer-related symptoms
- May have the most impact on patients reporting higher levels of symptoms or in patients who seek complementary treatments as adjuncts to medical treatment
- More structured and robust randomized control trials with multivariate analyses needed to determine definite conclusions on the role of art therapy in a clinical setting and to provide recommendations on appropriate interventions for cancer patients
References


