



Art therapy with people affected by cancer

With a growing and ageing population, more people in the UK will be affected by cancer in their lifetime. It is estimated that there are currently more than 3 million people living with cancer in the UK, rising to 3.5 million by 2025, 4 million by 2030 and 5.3 million by 2040.

According to a large-scale study of data from UK GP patient records, people diagnosed with cancer are at a greater risk of poor mental health even five years after their diagnosis.

Art therapy is not a treatment for cancer, but there is evidence that it can help the psychological wellbeing of people who have been affected by cancer.

What is art therapy?

Art therapy is an established form of psychotherapy, delivered by trained art therapists (also known as art psychotherapists). Art therapy uses art as the primary mode of expression, alongside talking with an art therapist. It aims to reduce distress and improve social, emotional and mental health by promoting insight, self-compassion and a sense of agency and self-worth.

Art therapy isn't like an art class. You don't need to be good at art or have previous experience. When making art in art therapy, you can choose materials that best suit you — such as paint, clay, or collage. You and the art therapist will also talk and think together to make sense of the thoughts, feelings and experiences that come up during your art-making or when you look at your artwork.

Sometimes it can be hard to talk directly about difficult experiences and emotions. Employing an art therapist in your team could be useful to help services deliver support effectively, as they can help people express themselves in a different way, or when words alone are not enough. Art therapy can help people of all ages and at all stages of life, including those who have been affected by difficult personal or cultural experiences, illness or disability. Sessions can also take place one-on-one or in a group setting.

In the UK, the title art therapist and art psychotherapist are protected by law. All UK art therapists must be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). All registered art therapists can be found on the HCPC's register.

What outcomes have people experienced following art therapy?

Reports from randomised controlled trials suggest that people can experience the following benefits from attending art therapy during or after cancer treatment:

- coping better with stress
- improved relationships
- reduced distress
- improved quality of life
- improved mood
- reduced anxiety or stress
- greater energy
- less fatigue
- increased spiritual wellbeing
- improved emotional awareness and self-acceptance

Why art therapy may be helpful

In qualitative studies involving interviews or written feedback from service users, people reported that artmaking in a supportive environment helped them to communicate their distress or pain in a manageable way.

Some people came to see new perspectives on their life or felt able to express new aspects of themselves. Participants also appreciated the support of the art therapist, and other group members in group art therapy.

In a survey of 32 art therapists and 55 recipients of cancer treatment across the UK, most service users reported that art therapy was easy to engage with, enjoyable and calming. They also said it helped them gain new perspectives on themselves and express difficult feelings without necessarily having to use words.

What service users say

"I focused on the creative process and forgot any distressing things."

"This is not a general art and craft class. The sharing time with peers and the therapist was very important to me. Witnessing the personal growth in a trusting environment was very therapeutic for me."

"I think [art therapy] is a very important mode for people who just do not [want to talk], I mean to be honest I just had got beyond talking."

Find out more

You can find more information about art therapy and the sources for this leaflet at [**baat.org/art-therapy/evidence/**](https://baat.org/art-therapy/evidence/)

You can also find registered art therapists in your area using our Find an art therapist search tool: [**baat.org/find-an-art-therapist/**](https://baat.org/find-an-art-therapist/)

This is an example of how art therapy can help, but music and drama therapy can also offer support.

To find out more about dramatherapy, visit [**badth.org.uk/**](https://badth.org.uk/)

To find out more about music therapy, visit [**bamt.org**](https://bamt.org)