

Information on art therapy



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Art therapy is a combination of hands-on art-making and psychological therapy. Art therapy is offered to help people to reflect on their feelings and thoughts. No previous artistic ability is needed. People who have had art therapy report that it helped them on a psychological level to better cope with the experience of a cancer diagnosis and some of the effects of cancer and its treatments. Randomised controlled trial research shows that art therapy helped improve coping strategies. A mixture of art therapy, meditation and yoga relieved anxiety and depression. Whilst more research is needed to learn more about the benefits of art therapy, the current research is largely positive. Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports art therapy for people with cancer and their supporters.

Practitioner Perspective

"Art therapy at Penny Brohn Cancer Care takes place in small groups of three or four people. It is a chance for people to use art materials to express how they feel - this can be very helpful for those feelings which are difficult to put into words. Art therapy can also help people to express feelings such as grief and anger, to look at their lives and to try out possible futures. Many people discover a sense of creativity and a joy in using art materials, which can sustain them during their illness. Reflecting on the image can bring personal insights which can help people make changes in their lives. Art therapists have a non-judgemental approach and there is no need to be 'good at art'."

More information: What is art therapy?

Art goes back as far as human history. Some people say that, like speech and tool-making, it is what makes us different from animals (Dissanayake 1992, quoted in handbook of art therapy). Modern art therapy is a mixture of art and psychology. It is

a creative way of exploring, expressing and communicating thoughts and feelings. For some this can be easier than putting things into words, and can be a profound way of bringing new realisations and resolutions to light. People do not need to have any artistic skill or previous experience to take part in and benefit from art therapy. The focus is not on artistic quality, but on what comes out of the process of making an image, and what the piece means to the person who made it.

Art therapy started in the 1920s and 30s, where psychiatrists looked at their client's artwork to gain a better understanding of their state of mind. From the 1940s through to the 1970s art therapy was influenced by ideas from psychology and psychotherapy. A key figure at this time was Margaret Naumburg who developed the use of art therapy in psychoanalysis as a new technique. She was greatly influenced by the well-known father of psychotherapy, Freud, and the psychiatrist Jung. Another key therapist, Edith Kramer, saw that the process of making art was therapeutic in its own right with no need for analysis. These two different approaches still exist today.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s to the present day, art therapists have continued to develop new methods and ways of working with people. Art therapy is now offered widely to children, adults, families and groups. It is used in many different therapeutic situations.

What happens in an art therapy session?

Art therapy can take place in groups, or individually with an art therapist. It may be offered as a one-off, or on a regular basis. During the session, the therapist will provide art materials to use. There is no limit to what materials can be used. For example pencils, paints and pastels may be offered, magazines may be provided for collage or if the facilities are available, clay and other materials may be offered for sculpture.

Some therapists work to a structure and will give a theme to focus on for the session. Others may choose to let their clients decide on their own focus. Some therapists may help with inspiration to help their clients get started. Their job is not to teach artistic skills, but to help their clients to therapeutically explore and express aspects of themselves or their life situation that are difficult to express in words.

Towards the end of the session, art therapists will give clients the chance to discuss their finished piece of work, what it means to them, and anything they want to share about the thoughts and feelings they had whilst making it. This can be a time to explore feelings in more depth, and a chance for new realisations, resolutions and ideas to form. In a group situation, this can be a time for people in similar situations to share common concerns.

In both the group setting and when given on an individual basis, the relationship between the client and the therapist is very important. Both must feel that the sessions are helpful and of benefit to the client.

What are the providers' claims?

Art therapy is offered both for healing and for its life-enhancing qualities. It is thought to improve emotional wellbeing and to help people to make changes and grow on a personal level¹. Used therapeutically, it is offered as a way of accessing thoughts and feelings that are either difficult to put into words, or have not yet been consciously explored. It is thought to be helpful in making decisions, or when going through difficult times in life to bring stability, clarity, resolution, self-confidence and

greater peace. It can be used to gain insight and a better understanding of yourself.

What do people who have had art therapy say about it?

There are six qualitative studies that ask people with cancer who have had art therapy about their experiences. The findings of these studies are very positive and focus on various different benefits. This qualitative research shows people with cancer report benefits including, amongst others, decreases in symptoms of distress, providing a haven, providing a distraction, helping pain-coping, improving tiredness/vitality, being a helpful way to strengthen positive feelings, explore and clarify feelings, develop/improve coping strategies and explore spiritual themes.

Are there any legal issues?

All art therapists practising in the UK are now registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC). Only professionally trained art therapists are legally able to practise art therapy. For information about the HPC register of art therapists please see contact details below.

How much does it cost?

The cost of art therapy varies due to the length of the session, the availability of funding and the location. Art therapy is sometimes offered through the NHS in hospitals, hospices and cancer centres for no or low cost. Some support groups may arrange sessions for their members. Private therapists may offer individual sessions at a cost of between £25 and £75.

Art therapy forms part of both the two and five day retreat courses at Penny Brohn Cancer Care. Art therapy can also be accessed through Cancerpoint as a ten or twelve week course at a cost of around £50.

What's the evidence?

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

Most of the available research does not reach the highest quality standards, but is of fair or good quality. Whilst not conclusive, the current evidence suggests that the benefits of art therapy are positive and life-enhancing.

Is art therapy safe?

There are no reports within the literature of serious adverse effects relating to art therapy. Art therapy is considered safe.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. http://www.baat.org/art_therapy.html

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org

- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

National organisations that represent the therapy:

- BAAT, 24-27 White Lion Street, London N1 9PD; Tel: 020 7686 4216 Fax: 020 7837 7945; email: info@baat.org
- Health Professions Council, Park House, 184 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BU, www: hpc-uk-org

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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