



A high percentage of patients with cancer receive a comorbid diagnosis of anxiety, depression, or another psychological disorder. However, research evaluating the efficacy of art therapy as an intervention to alleviate these symptoms is limited. Art therapy can offer psychosomatic symptom relief among patients with cancer, but more rigorous and randomized controlled clinical trials are warranted to strengthen evidence-based research supporting its clinical utility.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Art therapy uses creative processes to enrich and enhance the lives of patients experiencing psychosomatic symptoms.
- Based on a literature review of eight studies, art therapy improved patients' anxiety in seven studies, depression in five studies, and overall quality of life in four studies.
- Additional research on the benefits of art therapy are needed to fully understand its efficacy in improving symptoms of anxiety and depression and overall quality of life in patients with cancer.

#### KEYWORDS

art therapy; depression; anxiety; quality of life; holistic medicine

#### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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# Art Therapy

## A literature review of efficacy in improving psychosomatic symptoms in patients with cancer

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The National Cancer Institute (NCI, 2018) estimates that 439.2 new cancer diagnoses and 163.5 cancer-related deaths occur annually per 100,000 people in the United States. A cancer diagnosis is not easily accepted, and with incidence occurring more and more frequently in the United States, patients may require additional support to cope with their diagnosis. Patients who do not receive psychological support following a cancer diagnosis or while undergoing treatment for cancer are more likely to experience various states of mental distress (Gliznak, 2016). According to the NCI (n.d.), psychological disorders are common among patients with cancer and can lead to decreased overall quality of life, with 25% of patients with cancer being affected by major depression. The high incidence of anxiety and depression in patients with cancer presents an opportunity for the use of complementary and alternative therapies in relieving the psychosomatic symptoms that many patients experience (Jang et al., 2016).

Art therapy is an integrative mental health intervention involving creative processes, application of psychological theories, and human experiences within a psychotherapeutic relationship (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). The use of imagery, as well as the verbal and cognitive aspects of therapy sessions, provide an opportunity to promote improved mental and physical health. Although a diagnosis of cancer can bring about feelings of defeat and despair, patients' perceptions of the disease and its trajectory may be

transformed into a more positive experience through the creative process of art therapy (McNutt, 2016). This literature review provides a scholarly foundation for oncology clinical care by supporting art therapy as an intervention to reduce patients' psychosomatic symptoms (anxiety and depression) and improve patient perceptions of quality of life.

#### Literature Review

A literature search was conducted using CINAHL®, PubMed®, and PsycINFO®. Multiple combinations of the following search terms were included: *art therapy*, *cancer*, *neoplasm*, *oncolog\**, *myeloma*, *leukemia*, *breast cancer*, *depression*, *anxiety*, *fear*, *quality of life*, and *psych\**. Boolean operators were also used, and search terms were truncated to help to facilitate the search.

#### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published from 2011 to 2018. Full-text articles were obtained through the DePaul University Library database or the ILLiad® interlibrary loan management system. Included articles were written in English; were focused on the nursing, medicine, or psychology disciplines; and discussed the effects of art therapy in patients with cancer. Articles were excluded if they focused on other forms of therapy; had a non-oncology patient population; and were integrative reviews, systematic reviews, or literature reviews.

#### Data Synthesis and Analysis

Of the 193 articles that were eligible for the review, 84 were excluded based on the