

Art Therapy improves breast cancer patients' well-being

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Women having radiation treatment for breast cancer experienced lasting improvements in mental and physical health and quality of life after participating in five sessions of art therapy, Swedish researchers report.

The findings "strongly support art therapy as a powerful tool in rehabilitation of patients with breast cancer and, presumably, also in the care of patients with other types of cancer," Dr. Jack Lindh of Umea University, Umea, Sweden, and colleagues conclude in the European Journal of Cancer Care.

Women face major stresses after a diagnosis of breast cancer and art therapy could offer a way for women to express and "process" their emotions, the researchers say, thus improving their quality of life.

To investigate, they randomly assigned 41 breast cancer patients receiving radiation treatment to five once-a-week, hour-long sessions of art therapy or to a control group who didn't receive art therapy. Study participants completed surveys addressing their quality of life and self-image before beginning radiation, two months after radiation treatment began, and six months after the beginning of treatment.

A trained art therapist led each session, in which women were given a wide variety of art materials. Goals of the intervention were to offer time and space for expression and reflection; give support in the process of restoring body image; and reduce stress.

By six months, the researchers found, women who had participated in art therapy showed significant improvements in their overall quality of life, general health, physical health, and psychological health, while the control group only showed improvements in psychological health. The art therapy group also showed specific improvements in their body image, perspectives on the future, and radiation therapy side effects.

In previous studies, Lindh's team demonstrated improved coping skills and better ability to deal with others' demands in the breast cancer patients who did art therapy.

Art therapy may have improved the women's quality of life by helping them to maintain a positive identity, to deal with pain, and to feel control over their lives, the researchers say.

"The results of our studies suggest that the women, through image-making and reflection on their images, were able to give legitimacy to their own interpretations and experiences," as well as to "recognize and question" limits and boundaries imposed by traditional gender roles, they conclude.

SOURCE: European Journal of Cancer Care, January 2009.