

The efficacy of creative arts therapies to enhance emotional expression, spirituality, and psychological well-being of newly diagnosed Stage I and Stage II breast cancer patients: A preliminary study

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Abstract

Breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer among women in the United States. The psychological impact of the disease may include adjustment disorders, depression, and anxiety and may generate feelings of fear, anger, guilt, and emotional repression. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the efficacy of a complementary creative arts therapy intervention to enhance emotional expression, spirituality, and psychological well-being in newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. Thirty-nine women with Stage I and Stage II breast cancer were randomly assigned to an experimental group who received individual creative arts therapy interventions or a control group of delayed treatment. A series of analyses of covariance were used to analyze the results, which indicated the intervention was not effective in enhancing the emotional approach coping style of emotional expression or level of spirituality of subjects in this sample. However, participation in the creative arts therapy intervention enhanced psychological well-being by decreasing negative emotional states and enhancing positive ones of experimental group subjects. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

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One of every eight women is at risk to receive a breast cancer diagnosis in her lifetime (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2001). Breast cancer is the second most common form of cancer, “accounting for nearly one of every three cancers diagnosed in American women,” with African-Americans more likely to die from the disease than Caucasians (ACS, 2001). A breast cancer diagnosis can have a profound impact on a woman’s life and the lives of her significant others. Women struggling with the disease “may worry about caring for their families, keeping their jobs, or continuing daily activities. Concerns about tests, treatments, hospital stays, and medical bills are also common” (National Cancer Institute, 2003).

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Researchers have documented the psychological impact of the disease; adjustment disorders, depression, and anxiety affect breast cancer patients' ability to deal with everyday life stressors, and may generate feelings of fear, anger, guilt, and emotional repression (Glanz & Lerman, 1992; Razavi & Stiefel, 1999; Tapper, 1999; van der Pompe, Antoni, Visser, & Garssen, 1996). Emotional repression has been linked to women with breast cancer (Greer & Watson, 1985; Lilja, Smith, Malmstrom, & Salford, 1998; Watson et al., 1991). Recent research found that recurring major depression predicted a higher incidence of breast cancer (Penninx et al., 1998).

In addition to emotional and psychological distress and adjustment, a breast cancer diagnosis puts women face-to-face with existential life-and-death issues that may elicit a need to address spirituality (Cole & Pargament, 1999; Moadel et al., 1999). The spiritual domain is thought to provide "important and unique information, with both clinical implications and explanatory power [and] this information is lost when the spiritual domain is overlooked" (Brady, Peterman, Fitchett, Mo, & Cella, 1999, p. 426). Research that explored the role of spirituality in cancer patients' experience of adjusting and coping with the disease, although increasing, remains limited.

The ACS (2001) has acknowledged the value of a holistic approach to treatment, including the exploration and inclusion of complementary, mind-body, and psychological therapies to the conventional treatment regimen, and has encouraged cancer patients to "learn how a good attitude and healthy spirit may have positive physical effects." Effectively treating depression symptoms in cancer patients "results in better patient adjustment, reduced symptoms, and may influence disease course" (Spiegel, 1996, p. 114). Creative arts therapies are one such complementary, mind-body intervention that may assist breast cancer patients in their struggle.

Physicians, nurses, and clinicians are beginning to recognize the role that creative arts play in the healing process; increasingly, Arts in Medicine[®] programs are emerging throughout the United States and worldwide (Ganim, 1999). This development has popularized the use of unstructured, artist-guided, creative and expressive arts opportunities for patients being treated for a variety of cancers and other life-threatening illnesses (e.g., see Ganim, 1999; Graham-Pole, 2000; Rockwood-Lane & Graham-Pole, 1994). This study aimed to provide similar, creative arts, therapeutic intervention within the context of outpatient counseling sessions for women diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer. The benefits of integrating creative arts therapy interventions in the treatment of adult clients have been well documented (e.g., see Gladding & Newsome, 2003). More specifically, Gladding and Newsome contend that "art serves as both a catalyst and conduit for understanding oneself in a larger world context, [doing so] through stirring up feelings and opening up possibilities" (Gladding & Newsome, 2003, p. 252). The creative arts therapy interventions used in this research study provided opportunities "through which individuals [may] express thoughts and feelings, communicate nonverbally, achieve insight, and experience the curative potential of the creative process" (Malchiodi, 2003, p. 117).

The semi-structured creative arts therapy interventions used in this study were carefully selected adaptations from texts providing creative and spiritual practice exercises designed for individuals seeking personal, emotional, and psychological healing while facing life struggles, including life-threatening illness (Crockett, 2000; Horovitz-Darby, 1994; Lesser, 1999). Counselors are in a unique position to contribute by assessing breast cancer patients' ability to express difficult, negative emotions (e.g., anger, depression, and anxiety), providing creative arts therapy interventions that may facilitate healthy emotional expression, and assisting women to cope with and adjust to the stressors associated with a breast cancer diagnosis and its treatment.

Although a limited number of qualitative studies have explored the efficacy of creative arts therapy on breast cancer patients' emotional expression (Aldridge, 1996; Predeger, 1996) and one mixed-methods study explored psychological adaptation (Dibbell-Hope, 2000), we found no experimental studies that examined the efficacy of creative arts therapy interventions on breast cancer patients' spirituality or the role of spirituality on their psychological well-being and/or adjustment to the disease.

Research and conceptual explorations about the efficacy of creative arts therapies and art therapy on patients with various types of cancer have included music therapy (Aldridge, 1998), structured and unstructured journal writing, including poetry and prose (Davis, 2000; Haegglund, 1976; Philip, 1995; Smith, 1995; Stanton et al., 2002; Wyatt-Brown, 1995), art appreciation (Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000), and multimodal art therapy (Dreifuss-Kattan, 1990). Research studies about the efficacy of creative arts therapies and art therapy on breast cancer patients have included music therapy (Aldridge, 1996), sculpting (Cruze, 1998), multimodal art therapy (Predeger, 1996), and dance therapy (Dibbell-Hope, 2000). No experimental studies were found that explored the efficacy of creative arts therapy or art therapy (individual or group) interventions on breast cancer patients' emotional expression, spirituality, and/or psychological well-being. This area of inquiry remains relatively unexplored. The present study investigated the

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