

Art at the heart of therapy

Working with clay, watercolors or other media good diversion for mind and body

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CANTON: Betty Dennis and her daughters are discovering that there's definitely an art to dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

It's called art therapy.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Dennis, 77, a Massillon woman who's fighting a recurrence of breast cancer, forgot her troubles while beating on a piece of clay and then patiently molding the mound.

Seated by her side in the conference room at Mercy Medical Center were two of her daughters: Wendy Palmer, 58, of Brewster, and Judy DeHoff, 53, of Massillon.

DeHoff, who's also a three-year breast cancer survivor, shaped her hunk of clay into a clam shell with a small pearl tucked inside to symbolize the many beach vacations her family has treasured together.

DeHoff and Palmer encouraged their mother to join them for the free art therapy sessions when the Canton hospital started offering the program last month.

"It helps," Dennis said. "You get your mind on different things and different places. The more I keep involved, the better I feel."

Karen Elvin, an art therapist and professional counselor from Massillon, has been volunteering to lead about a dozen patients and family members touched by cancer through a therapeutic journey with clay, watercolors, chalk and other media.

"I know people in cancer recovery, they're just really open to any kind of healing that they could possibly do," Elvin said. "I see this as a way to help the patients really express themselves and tap into their whole body — mind, soul and body — and not just focus on the physical medicine. I see it as helping them gain control over a sense of their own wellness."

The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy as "an established mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages."

Art therapists have at least a master's degree in art therapy, which includes training in art techniques and theory, psychopathology, assessment and group work, as well as a supervised internship and thesis, said Gretchen Miller, president of the Buckeye Art Therapy Association.

The statewide group is pushing for a proposed law that would certify art therapists in the state "to make sure they have the right training and education to call themselves an art therapist," said Miller, a registered and board-certified art therapist from Lakewood.



According to the American Art Therapy Association, some common uses for art therapy include treatment of depression, anxiety and other mental and emotional problems; substance abuse and other addictions; abuse and domestic violence; trauma and loss; physical, cognitive and neurological problems; and psycho-social difficulties related to medical illnesses.

At Akron General Medical Center, art therapy is offered to inpatient and outpatient psychiatric patients.

"When you're creating images, what you're doing is you're tapping into your subconscious and you're tapping into the same source as where dreams come from," said Nancy Nierman Baker, a registered and board-certified art therapist and professional supervising clinical counselor for Akron General's partial hospitalization program. "So, in effect, what you're doing is creating a working dream on paper or in a sculpture."

Baker sought training after using art to help her through her own cancer diagnosis.

In addition to her work at Akron General, she helps to offer an art therapy program for cancer patients and their families at Stewart's Caring Place, a cancer support center in Akron.

Art therapy "helps the clients look at getting a greater awareness and understanding of their emotional problems and their life problems and the crises they go through," she said.

Patients don't need artistic talent to benefit, added Miller, who often encounters resistance from people who say, "I'm not an artist."

"That's a common obstacle for some clients," she said. "My response to that is, you don't have to be an artist to benefit from art therapy. Art therapy is more about creating from within, from inside, and using lines, shapes and colors to express what's going on with you."

With soothing music playing in the background during her recent art therapy session at Mercy Medical Center, Elvin asked the participants to think of their bodies as containers "full of energy, sometimes positive, sometimes negative."

Elvin encouraged the group to coax their mounds of clay into containers of any shape.

"You might want to think about what you want to give up or empty out of your life," Elvin said. With that in mind, Shelly Chatterelli, 47, of Perry Township quietly started shaping her clay into a deep container.

"Something to catch my tears," she said.

For the past two years, she's been caring for her husband as he battles cancer.

Mercy's art therapy program offers a chance "to get out and get some of it out and do something for myself," she said.

Along with her work at Mercy, Elvin leads art therapy sessions at the Ballinger Traumatic Brain Injury Clubhouse, a nonprofit group in Akron.

She's also used art therapy while working with autistic and special-needs children and patients recovering from strokes.

"It's just a wonderful alternative," Elvin said.

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