

THE CASE FOR HEALING BOXES®
AN INNOVATIVE ART THERAPY PROGRAM



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Abstract:

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the scientific basis of the potential for self-healing through the process of art therapy, as defined by the American Art Therapy Association (**Footnote 1.**) This paper makes the case for a novel, hands-on, art therapy technique, origami Healing Boxes® which are being piloted in the Yale New Haven Hospital system in 2015. The science behind art therapy suggests that through the act of making something with one’s hands (e.g. a painting, knitted sweater, drawing, poem, or set of origami boxes) a person may set the stage for self-healing.

Studies show that patients who make a handcrafted object or an original work of art may experience any or all of the following:

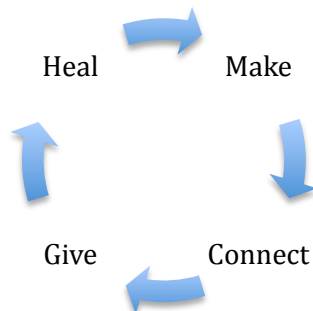
- a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment,
- a respite from the focus on the pain and worry of a debilitating illness or condition,
- an expanding circle of supporters, e.g. hospital roommates and more empathetic caregivers, friends, neighbors, family members – recipients of the gift made by the patient, and,
- a sense of calm and fulfillment from having helped encourage or inspire another person without expectation of reciprocity – the engagement in altruistic behavior.

This presentation explores two central questions:

- 1) What is the underlying scientific basis for explaining the potential effectiveness of art therapy programs such as the origami Healing Boxes® ? and,
- 2) What are examples of successful art therapy programs in other hospital or care giving centers?

Key Concepts:

- A creative art therapy activity holds the potential for healing by transforming or re-directing a patient’s fears and anxieties, thereby lowering the stress response while encouraging self-discovery, positive emotions and better communications.
- Making something with one’s hands can have a salutatory effect on the patient by stimulating a sense of control and accomplishment.
- Being connected to others is a positive two-way street; networks aid in healing both the patient and the giver. You don’t have to “go-it-alone” with a disease.
- Engaging in altruistic behavior without expectation of reciprocity can have a positive, health-inducing effect. The following diagram depicts the three steps which lead to healing in the Healing Boxes® art therapy process, The goal is to stimulate the self-healing capabilities of a patient.



Step One: Make art objects

Step Two: Connect with others to build or enhance a social support network

Step Three: Give art objects away with no expectation of reciprocal kindness

Question # One:

What is the scientific basis for explaining the potential effectiveness of art therapy programs? Positive outcomes may manifest themselves during three steps of the art therapy process.

Step One: Making Art Objects

Being in a hospital setting is stressful for patients of all ages. Therefore, any activity that reduces that stress can have a positive effect on several levels, including, but not limited to; the reduction of pain; the unleashing or revelation of negative emotions; better patient-medical staff communications; and the emergence of a more centered and integrated self – all these conditions can encourage a positive mental and emotional outlook.

For adults, research shows that activities such as knitting can have a positive, calming effect, due in part to the production of dopamine which creates a state of well-being. Also, eye-hand coordination is improved through crafting, and usually, self-esteem is enhanced. The display of one's finished art or craft project can often engender a sense of accomplishment.

In one study of more than 3,500 knitters, published in the British Journal of Occupational Therapy concluded that 81% of respondents with depression reported feeling happy after knitting. More than half reported feeling “very happy.” **(Footnote 2.)** Psychologists believe that having a strong sense of “self-efficacy” – I can make things happen – affects how we approach new challenges, particularly as they relate to health crises.

Research at the National Institute of Health, Center for Biotechnology research shows that: “The repetitive motions of knitting, for example, activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which quiets that “fight or flight” response. **(Footnote 3.)** This calming effect allows for the release of neurotransmitters that can open the body to self-healing.

Lastly, being immersed in an art or crafting project can create the state of “Flow”, a condition that can transport the patient out of a physically and emotionally debilitating illness or medical condition to a state of transcendence. The salutatory effect of getting into “the Flow” has been well studied and documented by psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In a 2004 TED Talk he presented his research that shows how getting into a flow state, being so totally involved in an activity, be it artistic expression, through mind, body or musical engagement, then the healing process can be ignited, because of achieving a state of happiness or bliss. **(Footnote 4.)** He argued: “You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears. You forget yourself. You feel part of something larger.”

For children, creating art or doing craft projects may provide the most direct way for expressing inner fears, depression or levels of pain. This expression can enhance the bonds between medical caregivers and patients. More compassionate and empathetic care has shown to result in better health outcomes.

Step Two: Art to Connect to Others

Few things are more traumatic to a young child (or a patient of any age) than being alone in a hospital setting, facing a medical condition that may be life threatening. Feeling isolated and surrounded with medical equipment can be emotionally wrenching. (Note: the author spent four months in St. Frances Hospital in Peoria, IL as a third grader being treated for polio, isolated from family and friends, scared he would have to live in an iron lung for the rest of his life.) Engaging in artistic activities can help connect patients on several levels: 1) with caregivers, 2) with family and friends, 3) with a global network of similar patients through the Internet. Research suggests that being connected on these various levels can lessen anxiety and instill a sense of hope and inspiration.

Communicating one's medical condition (i.e. the level of pain, range of symptoms, or emotional fears) can greatly affect the quality of the patient-caregiver relationship and the healing environment. An empathetic doctor or nurse may discover a clue to a better therapy or medication or may spark the self-generative healing process when there is a deeper connection with the patient. For young kids who may not have the words to express their physical and emotional state, art therapy may provide that avenue for communication. Like-wise, author and Medical Doctor Bernie Siegel has found art therapy to be very positive for the rehabilitation and support adult cancer patients.

(Footnote 5.)

When artwork done in hospitals and care centers is displayed on the premises it reminds the medical staff of whom they are there to serve. Stories of survival and return to health are positive reminders of the mission of the organization. Research shows that medical staff who participate in art therapy programs tend to enjoy work more and, as a consequence, the staff turnover rate is decreased. **(Footnote 6.)** and more empathetic care is given.

Being connected to family and loved ones, friends and neighbors is essential to the healing process. Countless books and studies point to the multiple benefits of having a deep support network. **(Footnote 7.)** However, not everyone is blessed with expanding circles of support. Having a simple art activity with the outcome being an object to be given away (i.e. making Healing Boxes®) may open up an avenue for connecting to others. With younger kids, this reaching out by a patient can announce to the outside world that conversation and interaction with the patient is desired. Kids often don't want to broach the difficult topic of a debilitating disease, but by reaching out, a patient can confront isolation head on.

A variety of research suggests that when people both participate in and help create support structures their health and wellbeing improves. For example, a

Duke Heart Center Patient Support Program suggests that cardiac patients who volunteered and assisted other cardiac patients improved health outcomes for both the recipient of the care giving and for themselves (**Footnote 8.**) For many people, having a supportive community reinforces a positive outlook; the acceptance of the love and caring of others affirms a person's self-worth. A group of research scientists (Brown and colleagues) followed a sample of 205 cancer patients over ten years. They found depressive symptoms to be the most consistent predictor of poor survival. (**Footnote 9.**)

In 2015 there now exists a wealth of ways to connect patients to support communities through use of the Internet. This may take many forms including: cloud computing for medical diagnosis, website care community creation, (e.g. <http://www.lotsahelpinghands.com/>) medical associations' disease and care websites, databases of medical research and journals, etc. Young kids are becoming adept at connecting through social media, blogs, and various websites, such that new methods of networking to find support are emerging. An example local to New Haven, CT is <http://www.childhoodcancerkids.org/> through which a mother and her daughters have created an international network to help kids heal through cancer research, therapy and support. (**Footnote 10.**)

Step Three: Art, Altruism and Healing

Ancient wisdom suggests: "Those who refresh others, will themselves be refreshed" – Proverbs, 11:25

Regardless of one's religious persuasion, the act of giving with no expectation of reciprocal benefit has been enshrined throughout history. Evolutionary biologists speculate that altruism may be engrained in the DNA of *homo sapiens*. Medical research shows that altruism, a term coined in 1851 by philosopher August Comte from the Italian, "altrui" – of, or to others, or to someone else, may improve health in two ways: 1) by increasing well-being, emotionally, mentally, spiritually – a positive effect, or, 2) by decreasing depression, lessening a negative effect.

In his book, ***Altruism and Health***, Dr. Robert Post (**Footnote 11.**) makes the following arguments:

- a. Unselfish love and kindness, including manifestations such as forgiveness, displace emotional states such as rage, bitterness, and hatred, all of which cause stress and consequently stress-related illnesses through adverse impacts on immune function.
- b. Human nature may have evolved emotionally and behaviorally in a manner that confers health benefits as a result of benevolent emotions and helping behaviors.
- c. Genuine altruism is an action done without assuming reciprocal or reputational gain for the agent, but that by its very inward dynamic enhances well-being and often contributes to health.

If integrative medicine is to tap the best energies of mind/body/spirit, then practicing some form of altruism or “unreciprocated love” may confer health benefits. One of the universal principles of the great religions is that unlimited love is Godliness. This sentiment has been expressed in various ways by great leaders whose healing powers have enthralled millions. Consider:

Mother Teresa:

“We can do no great things – only small things with great love.”

The Qur’an:

“Kind speech and forgiveness is better than alms followed by injury.”

Leviticus:

“You shall love the alien as yourself.”

Participation in the activities of religious communities and engaging in personal meditation and prayer have been documented to have a positive effect on health. Yet one needs not be a member of a religious organization to experience the positive psychological effects of altruism, the kind of love given freely that expects nothing in return. Forgiveness represents a form of altruism in which the perpetrator is given love despite past transgressions. Another example is the selfless act of organ donation, wherein the donor may not know the person to whom his/her organs benefit.

In the book A Journey Through Cancer, Gregory Friccione sums up this view stating:

Health benefits occur when people learn to mitigate against stress overload, strengthen their social support, develop hopeful, positive belief in their futures, and perhaps, armed with resiliency, act altruistically towards others.” **(Footnote 12.)**

An art therapy program that reinforces the self-healing mechanisms at all three of these levels, a) making, b) connecting, and, c) giving away – altruism - has the potential for enhancing the healing process.

Question # Two:

What are some examples of successful art therapy programs?

What is the range of art therapy programs run in hospitals and care centers in the developed world today? and does the data show effectiveness?

There is a time immemorial tradition of using art for healing purposes. Navajo elders still use sand painting as part of healing rituals for both tribal members and for the natural world. The crafting of mandalas is ubiquitous in Eastern cultures, as well.

A comprehensive recent review of art therapy programs **(Footnote 13.)** has been conducted by Sarah C. Slayton, Jeanne D’Archer, and Frances Kaplan, Marylhurst, OR and published in the Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 27(3) pp. 108-118 © AATA, Inc. 2010. That study looked at both the quantitative and qualitative measures used to evaluate “effectiveness” in a wide variety of art therapy programs. Those programs included:

- individual art therapy (e.g. drawing, painting, sewing);
- group art therapy (draw the disease directive);
- painting and stone work to create metaphors for frustration tolerance;
- therapy using the “squiggle game” – analysis of the themes depicted in the squiggles compared with stress reactions
- generative drawing tests
- mural making and journaling
- water color painting
- coloring a prepared mandala
- writing about stressful events – “art-stress”.

The authors of this 2010 study conclude with the following:

“Although we believe that art therapists have the same challenges we have always had in art therapy research—to be more standardized and more precise, to do more fully experimental designs, and to replicate studies—there seems to be positive movement in the field of art therapy, and ultimately, toward the well-being of our clients and patients.

Since 2007, which was the end date for the studies in our review, several new studies have been conducted. Continued improvement in our field will be accomplished by evaluating outcome studies that have emerged since 2008 and by conducting larger-scale effectiveness studies in the future. Our review is a small contribution to the ongoing clarification of how art therapy helps with various challenges and what components of the art therapeutic encounter lead to positive outcomes.

Conclusions of this Case for Healing Boxes® :

Art therapies can complement conventional medical therapies by helping to relieve stress and foster feelings of positive well-being in both the patient and the care giver. Individuals can jumpstart and optimize the healing process by becoming engaged in art therapy projects that include the production of art objects that can then be given away without consideration of reward in exchange – a truly altruistic act. In order to test the effectiveness of particular art therapy programs, individual controlled experiments need to be conducted that analyze both quantitative and qualitative measures of success.

As the Komen website explains (**Footnote 14**):

“Limited evidence suggests that family caregivers of cancer patients may benefit from art therapy to help them cope with the stress of care giving. Possible benefits include reduced stress, lowered anxiety, increased positive emotions, and increased positive communication with cancer patients and healthcare professionals. **Art therapy may also reduce pain and other symptoms in cancer patients.** More studies are needed to determine how best to use this form of intervention with this population.”

Please send any questions or comments to the author:

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Footnotes:

1. The American Art Therapy Association's definition of "art therapy", see: <http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-aboutus.html>
"The use of art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being... Today art therapy is a widely practiced in a wide variety of settings including hospitals, psychiatric and rehabilitation facilities, wellness centers, forensic institutions, schools, crisis centers, senior communities, private practice, and other clinical and community settings. During individual and/or group sessions art therapists elicit their clients' inherent capacity for art making to enhance their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
2. Riley, Jill; Corkhill, Betsan; Morris, Clare, "The benefits of knitting for personal and social wellbeing in adulthood: findings from an international survey", <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cot/bjot/2013/00000076/00000002/art00002>, *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Volume 76, Number 2, February 2013, pp. 50-57(8).
3. Sharon A. Gutman, and Victoria Schindler, "The Neurological Basis of Occupation"
Occupational Therapy International Journal,
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17623380> 2007;14(2):71-85.
4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, the secret to happiness 18:55, TED Talk: Filmed February 2004 at TED2004.
http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow?language=en
5. Bernie Siegel, *The Art of Healing: Uncovering Your Inner Wisdom and Potential for Self-Healing*, available from: <http://amzn.to/1Bw6fg4>
6. Nancy A. Nainis, "Art Therapy with an Oncology Care Team", Evanston, IL published in: *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 22(3) pp. 150-154, 2005. This research shows that medical staff who participate in art therapy programs tend to enjoy work more and, as a consequence, the staff turnover rate is decreased.
7. Jean Baker Mill, M.D. *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life*, available from: <http://amzn.to/1B1pBGs>
8. Duke Heart Center Patient Support Program, (Sullivan & Sullivan 1997) see citation p 365 hardcopy cancer book
9. See p 426 hardcover bok Brown, Lavy, Rosbeyer, Edgar, 2003).
10. See the story of Sierra and Emalena Preveza, "America's Kindest Kid"
<http://www.childhoodcancerkids.org/about-us.html>
11. Stephen G. Post, Editor, *Altruism & Health* <http://amzn.to/1rOTaym>
12. Gregory Friccione in Stephen G. Post, Editor, *Altruism & Health* p.368.
13. Sarah C. Slayton, Jeanne D'Archer, and Frances Kaplan, Marylhurst, OR and published in the *Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 27(3) pp. 108-118 © AATA, Inc. 2010.
14. Komen website:
<http://ww5.komen.org/BreastCancer/Arttherapy.html> - sthash.A5i0ohGO.dpuf

Other Resources:

Books:

Stephen G. Post, Editor, *Altruism & Health*

Bernie Siegel, *The Art of Healing: Uncovering Your Inner Wisdom and Potential for Self-Healing*

Mary Gorham, et al, *Flourishing Enterprise: The New Spirit of Business*

Websites:

Memorial Sloan Kettering Alternative Therapies

<http://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine>

Complementary Services Yale NHH Smilow

<http://bit.ly/14kLr0S>

Komen Foundation

<http://ww5.komen.org/BreastCancer/Arttherapy.html>

American Cancer Society

<http://bit.ly/1hMCT4g>

Healing Boxes

<http://www.healingboxes.org>

Mary Gorham – Professional Coach

<http://www.marygorham.com>

Journals:

Journal of American Association of Art Therapists

<http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-publications.html>

The American Journal of Public Health.

See: 2010 February; 100(2): 254-263,

The Connection Between Art, healing, and Public health: A Review of Current Literature, by Heather L. Stuckey, DEd, and Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH

<http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>

Journal of Applied Arts and Health

<http://bit.ly/1xtpHKY>

Associations:

American Association of Art Therapists

<http://www.americanarttherapyassociation.org/>

Society of Integrated Oncology

<http://www.integrativeonc.org/>

The Story Behind the Healing Boxes®



On January 7, 2014, when I heard the three words, “you have cancer”, I was in shock. Me? Cancer? During the nine months that followed, the staff at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven helped me through major surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, while our friends and family showered us with love and food. While everyone’s care was helping me to heal, I also saw that their care had a healing effect on them too. As an executive coach, I had experienced this circle of healing many times, but now as a cancer patient, I had new appreciation for its power. So while I was in chemotherapy, I wondered what might be something simple that any patient or visitor at the hospital could do that would help everyone heal. Several years earlier, my husband, Jon, had developed some small origami nesting boxes, and it occurred to us that patients and visitors all around us might enjoy making them for their loved ones and other patients. The hospital staff liked the idea, and introduced us to Christin FitzGerald and her feather printmaking. Together, we all found ourselves inspired to offer these boxes to you. So in a spirit of great love and fun, we invite you to make however many sets of boxes you choose. Fill them with an inspirational message and/or a prize if you wish. Then feel free to keep a set for yourself and share another set with someone you love. And for yet more joy and healing, make a set and ask a hospital staff member to give it to another patient who could really use a smile.

As you do, please join us in **healing ourselves, healing one another, and healing the world.**

To your health!

Mary Gorham

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The Story Behind the Feather Prints

My husband, daughter and I came to know and love the community at Smilow Cancer Hospital during my husband’s 25-day stay at the hospital for a stem cell transplant in June 2012. My family is deeply grateful for the care and support we all received from the entire staff of Smilow then, as well as the care we continue to receive. As an artist, I have enjoyed sharing print making with patients, family, caregivers and staff at Smilow as an expression of that gratitude. The feather printmaking workshops I have led at Smilow have allowed me to support others in synchronizing inspiration from the natural world with the therapeutic benefits of the creative process. It was a pleasure to provide printed feather images for these Healing Boxes®; they were made with love.

Christin FitzGerald

