

# Chapter 24. Creating doorways: finding existential meaning and growth through the creative arts in the face of life-threatening illness

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*Rosemary C. Reilly<sup>1</sup>, Virginia Lee<sup>2</sup>, Kate Laux<sup>3</sup> & Andréanne Robitaille<sup>3</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>Concordia University, Montreal*

*<sup>2</sup>McGill University Health Centre, Montreal*

*<sup>3</sup>Cedars CanSupport, Montreal*

*rosemary.reilly@concordia.ca*

## **Abstract**

Life-threatening illness can be sufficiently traumatic to shatter one's beliefs about self, others, and the world. This disruption can trigger an instinctive search for meaning. Research highlights that how individuals respond post-adversity can make the difference between experiencing posttraumatic stress or posttraumatic growth (PTG) and existential growth (EG). This paper presents the findings of a pilot study situated in a tertiary care cancer centre and details the impact of creative arts therapy on the experiences of individuals living through breast cancer. Ten women were interviewed about their experiences making art, many for the first time. Emergent themes included: the significant benefits of art-making on their sense of self-efficacy; the emotionally enhancing nature of art-making; the power of their artwork to trigger insights (including subthemes of EG, PTG) or in communicating their experiences to loved ones; and how art-making changed their worldview and life philosophies, creating doorways of possibilities. Findings suggest that art-making provides a safe, dynamic context for individuals experiencing breast cancer to reflect on profound personal changes and to re-story losses following adversity through creative arts practices.

**Keywords:** posttraumatic growth, existential growth, cancer, art therapy, art making.

## **Theoretical background**

Breast cancer is the leading cancer for women in Canada. One in nine is expected to develop breast cancer in her lifetime (Canadian Cancer Society, 2015). The arts have been shown to be an effective tool in processing adversity, both in therapeutic and nontherapeutic contexts. With women experiencing breast cancer, the arts have been linked to:

- enhanced well-being (Burke, Sabiston, & Vallerand, 2011);
- a sense of control over the psychological and emotional impact of cancer on their daily lives, including warding off preoccupation with the illness (Link, Robbins, Mancuso, & Charlson, 2004);
- improving the quality of survival (Reynolds & Lim, 2007);
- significantly lower ratings of depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms (Egberg Thyme, Sundin, Wiberg, Öster, Åström, & Lindh, 2009); and
- eliciting flow experiences that served to banish intrusive thoughts about cancer and provide experiences of mastery and control (Reynolds & Prior, 2006).

This particular pilot study, embedded and conducted in a tertiary care cancer centre, examined the impact of participation in an on-going creative arts therapy and support group on the experiences of women living through breast cancer. Using an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and accessed through language and shared meanings, we adopted a case study qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2012) and employed a cross-case comparative approach (Merriam, 1998), since creative

theoretical insights often arises from the juxtaposition of contradictory or paradoxical evidence.

*This paper details the findings of the following research question: What are the processes of meaning making used by women receiving treatment for breast cancer as expressed through group art therapy within a breast cancer centre?*

## **Method**

Ten women between the ages of 41 and 67 years, diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer, participated in a series of 2-hour art therapy group sessions. They were interviewed about the impact of art-making on their cancer experiences. A semi-structured interactive interview process was employed, using an open-ended, conversational format to facilitate the development of trust and rapport.

## **Findings**

When analysing the interview data using the constant comparison method, the overriding theme of existential growth emerged. Existential growth is the deep psychological and spiritual change that occurs when individuals face, rather than deny, their mortality (Sodergren, Hyland, Crawford, & Partridge, 2004). This existential growth emerged from the reflections and insights that occurred while making art or when reflecting about the pieces of art the participants made. This category existed across all 10 cases.

## ***Existential Meaning and Growth***

### ***Making sense of the cancer experience***

The women participants linked making art to being able to find meaning in the cancer experience and in life during or post-treatment.

*...being able to talk about it and explain why we did what we did to each other and to you. (Carolt)*

*It's funny the way, the things you came up with intuitively, very spontaneously then when you looked back at them you would find meanings that would relate to...I would find meanings to what I was feeling or thinking or going through. (Andrea)*

The process of art-making, or their art pieces, revealed to the women their thoughts, feelings, and desires which allowed them to make sense of their cancer experience in the context of their lives.

### ***A desire for more self-direction***

This category illuminated the desire of these women who experienced breast cancer to have more choice, control, and autonomy in their lives.

*...at the same time it was the only thing I was believing at that time that could help me to get rid of my depression. (Gabriella)*

*...so for me the art was the only way that I could have some sort of control about what I have and what I'm going through. (Aurore)*

Art-making gave these women a sense of control and choice at a time when they felt most out of control with regards to their bodies and appearance, the course of the disease, and the outcomes of their life-threatening illness.

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†All names are pseudonyms.

### *The need for closer relationships*

The women in this study reported not only a deepening of relationships, but the need to be closer and the need to be part of a community.

*...it's still important after your treatment to be able to connect with people that have gone through the same thing. (Carol)*

*I wanted them [her daughters] to know how much they meant to me—that they had a huge, they still do have a huge place in my heart. (Aurore)*

The creative arts therapy group provided a space for these women to form relationships based on their shared art-making. The process of art-making also created a liminal space (an in-between transitional space) for the participants to recognize and express their needs for affiliation, connection, and closeness. This liminal space gave the women time to reflect, to collect their thoughts and reenergize, before taking action again.

### *A reconsideration of fundamental life values*

The group art therapy sessions created conditions that allowed the process of meaning making to progress. The participants reported that their cancer experience triggered a reordering of their values and priorities in life.

*There's a really nice poem by, I think it's, is it Erma Bombeck? It's like if I had to do things over again, and this is what I'd do, I'd spend more time playing with the kids and less time worrying about the handprints on the wall... (Élise)*

*[I] think that I need to appreciate more how precious each minute is because I think we get carried away with ambition, career, this and that and when I was threatened with...it doesn't matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore. What matters is that you're there to appreciate... (Sofia)*

Art-making created a space for the women to reflect on what was important for them at this critical juncture of their lives, and to reprioritize their values in the context of facing their own mortality.

### ***Posttraumatic Growth***

In addition, there were also strong indications of posttraumatic growth, the positive psychological change experienced when facing adversity and other challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This posttraumatic growth emerged from the reflections and insights that occurred while making art, when reflecting about the pieces they made, and when reflecting on their lived experience. This category was present across all 10 cases.

### ***A deeper compassion for others***

As an additional outcome of the search for meaning, participants reported feeling more connection with others, specifically those who have experienced traumatic events.

*...when I had the cancer...I just didn't realize...I mean you go through hell. You don't realize that others close to you are going through hell too for different reasons...It's not physical but they are going through hell as well. (Sofia)*

*I probably shouldn't assume so, but actually anyone going through this or any kind of crises...This is kind of how you have to...I think it is really the only way you can deal with it. (Ray)*

Art-making created a reflective space for the women to develop compassion, empathy, and perspective-taking (i.e., temporarily suspending one's own point-of-view in an attempt to view a situation as someone else might).

### ***An emergence of new opportunities and possibilities***

The search for meaning also highlighted to the women participants how new opportunities and possibilities can become available to them, which

were unavailable prior to their cancer diagnosis and participation in the art therapy group.

*The disease seemed to have awoken a creative side in me that needed an outlet. (Élise)*

*Can you believe I didn't know how to knit? Now I want to learn how to knit. I want to learn how to crochet. I want to know all these things. I want to know and I started to do something so it was a new discovery, but something that I always wanted to do. (Gabiella)*

The majority of women in this study had no previous art-making experience (except as children); therefore, art-making opened up a new world for them to explore. This new endeavour generated passion and enthusiasm.

### ***Feeling able to meet future challenges***

The participants described a fortified sense of self- a resiliency, as in “what doesn't kill me makes me stronger”.

*...my famous golden tears. They were mine then and they are still mine today. Some days there are days when tears are still shed. I consider those golden tears because I understand them. I accept them. I wish they weren't there but they're a part of me, of course. (Eva)*

*As [another member of the art therapy group] mentioned something occurred to me this morning, and I believe this is so true. There is only one person I count on and this is myself and this is true. (Jeanne-Marie)*

Art-making created a reflective space for these women to identify and tap into inner resources to support their navigation of the cancer experience.

### ***Reordered priorities***

This code category displayed the participants' reordered priorities and a greater and fuller appreciation of life in general, and in their relationships in particular.

*...then the need to have nature around for me that was a need to have balance around me. (Eva)*

*And now money is more important because I want him [her son] to have the opportunities to go to school. I want him to be supported in ways that I never was. So he has those safety nets and if I don't live for long, I want to make sure there is something here for him. (Ray)*

Art-making created a liminal space for the participants to sift through their life priorities and re-align them to what was now most important to them.

All of the participants noted that it was the process of art-making that allowed these changes, insights, and transformations to occur. They attributed these dynamics to art as a process of connecting or reconnecting one with the self, the past self, or past or current relationships. This connection-reconnection acted as fertile ground for the processes of existential and posttraumatic growth to take root.

### *Art-making as Connector-Reconnector*

#### *Discovery of Self*

Making art allowed the participants to discover something essential or new by reflecting on all previous experiences.

*Every time I explore my "innerscape", I learn a little bit more about my true self, inner peace, the beauty and the joy of being myself, and feeling connected as a whole being. (Gabriella)*

*I'm being more assertive of who I am because remember when we were going through the art I always thought there was something special with the horse... I felt that I had to follow the rules or the expectations, whatever and what I really wanted was to be free to be me... (Sofia)*

### *Shifts in identity/sense of Self*

Making art fashioned a space for the participants to reconfigure their perceptions of self as a consequence of having experienced or engaged in art therapy.

*...those artworks that I mentioned, it gave me a sense of accomplishment, so I think that, yeah, so that was a nice feeling for me.  
(Rose)*

*I just wanted to feel good about myself and through art...art has helped me feel good about myself. (Aurore)*

Art-making created a *doorway* for self-discovery in the face of living with a life-threatening illness, which in turn allowed these women to refine and reshape their identities or discard ill-fitting aspects to their identities. This impacted their sense of self and provided rich soil for existential and posttraumatic growth.

## **Discussion**

Art-making and art therapy can be useful and important supplements to conventional treatment for breast cancer patients, fostering a space of meaningful reflection, growth, and transformation. The emotional and psychological rollercoaster that women experience post-breast cancer diagnosis must be addressed as a priority in conjunction with their medical treatment.

Art-making can be a mode of action and a means of intervening in the world. It allowed the participants to physically act in order to express to themselves (and others) their thoughts, feelings, struggles or triumphs, intentionally or unconsciously, at symbolic, metaphoric, or literal levels. Art-making creates interstitial spaces that foster the positive individual changes

that characterize existential and posttraumatic growth, which have implications for patient quality of life. We found that art-making was more than a *distraction* (a trivializing term), but shaped an active, dynamic, liminal space that allowed for patient agency to be enacted. These women participants had the time and space to reflect and actively construct meaning about their cancer experiences and about themselves in the context of cancer.

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