

The Healing Power of Art for People With Cancer

An interview with Lisa Simms Booth, executive director at the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit health, education and arts organization.

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What are the benefits of art for people with cancer?

We have innate creativity that is often squashed when we are little kids. Doing creative activities taps into a reservoir of inner peace. We know that it reduces stress. There is something very meditative, very calming about it, so you find yourself in a much more relaxed frame of mind. People tell us that when they've been in pain or some discomfort, working on a project takes them to a different place and even lessens the pain they're feeling. And often, it helps you process things—even if you aren't really realizing how much the feelings may be buried.

What type of art programs do you offer cancer patients?

We offer a host of creativity programs that people with cancer can participate in, and they range from writing to painting to poetry to making mosaics to doing photography or knitting or sewing. We offer almost 80 different programs a month. They're not just in the arts—we also offer psychosocial support. Since the pandemic, we offer both in-person and virtual programs. And they are free or low cost. We don't want money to be a barrier.

Are programs like those at Smith Center available around the country?

We partner with a lot of hospitals, but arts programs are also burgeoning in many hospitals themselves. The National Organization for Arts and Health is a membership organization of practitioners and people from both the medical and arts communities who are really trying to further this field. And it's becoming a field of study. At the University of Florida, for example, you can get a degree in arts and health.

Setting aside your program and programs embedded in hospitals, would you encourage people living with cancer to seek out art on their own as a way to de-stress and heal?

Absolutely. That's the beauty of the arts. If there's nothing in the hospital near you and coming to

a program like ours, even virtually, doesn't really work for you, just doing something where you bring the arts into your world, I think, would be beneficial. You don't have to make a masterpiece. People would be quite surprised at how much better they feel by just partaking in artistic and creative outlets.

What inspires you in doing this work?

What inspires me is the people who say how much our services have helped them. My own mother had cancer for many years. I think the Smith Center would've helped my mother, and it would've helped me, because our programs are open to families and caregivers as well. I think a place like the Smith Center would've been a godsend, and that's what keeps me motivated.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/healing-power-art>