

Creativity and Spirituality in Nursing

Implementing Art in Healing

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Creative modalities offer nurses a new perspective on how to care for patients. The link between creativity and healing is well documented. In response to this, many hospitals have instituted programs that include arts and creativity. Because of their unique bonds with patients, nurses play a crucial role in bringing creative arts into patient care. Several recommendations are given for implementing specific art media (eg, music, drawing, dance, writing) in the clinical setting. **KEY WORDS:** *art, endorphins, meditation, mind-body, perception of pain, shaman*
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Interventions that involve creativity and spirituality are offering nurses a new perspective on caring for patients today. Research demonstrates that creativity heals: music not only affects the body physically but also stimulates, calms, or even transports the mind to a *sublime* realm, just as painting and sculpture may call up images that trigger deep memories or allow patients to access stories and archetypes of courage, strength, and wisdom.^{1–5} The process of making and viewing art or listening to music can carry both patient and nurse into another province—one in which awareness is heightened and the participants may experience joy and an undeniable connection to the spirit.^{1,4} It is in this province that holistic healing can occur, both physically and mentally.¹

The purpose of this article is to frame the physiology and history of art as a healing modality, describe how art is used in hospital programs, and explain how nurses can implement creativity and spirituality as advanced therapeutics. The word *art* includes painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, storytelling, journaling, and other expressions typically assigned to the creative arena.

HOW CREATIVITY AND SPIRITUALITY HEAL: MIND-BODY PHYSIOLOGY

Studies show that creativity and spirituality can heal by changing a person's physiology and attitude from one of stress to one of deep relaxation. When the brain perceives an image of a peaceful scene or engages in creative work, it alerts parasympathetic arousal. Heartbeat slows, blood pressure drops, breathing slows, blood goes to the intestines, and the body shifts into deep relaxation.^{6,7} Creative endeavors also stimulate the hypothalamus to activate the autonomic nervous system, which balances and maintains blood flow, heart rate, and hormone level. In addition, the creative process can cause specific areas of the brain to release endorphins and other neurotransmitters that affect brain cells and the cells of the immune system, relieving pain and triggering the immune system to function more efficiently.⁷ Endorphins are like opiates, creating an experience of expansion, connection, and relaxation. In conjunction with these physiologic changes, art and meditation regularly change people's attitudes, emotional states, and *perception of pain*. When people engage in creative or spiritual acts, even as passive observers, the process creates hope, restores optimism, and helps them cope with debilitating problems.

Physicians at the Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York reported that many of their patients with cancer who went from the hospital to look at Monet's *Water Lilies* at the Museum of Modern Art described an improved mental/emotional state afterward; as the patients sat and drifted into the colors and fluid shapes,

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they relaxed, let go of their concerns about cancer for a moment, and felt much better.^{8,9} Many hospitals now have an *art cart* with posters of paintings (eg, *Water Lilies*) that patients can select to hang in their rooms. Some operating rooms allow patients to choose music to play during surgery, and chemotherapy rooms have CD players so that patients can listen to favorite tapes during treatment.^{8,9} New research shows that art in an intensive care unit relaxes patients; these patients use less pain medication and leave the hospital a day earlier than those who do not have art in their rooms.^{3,4,10,11} In fact, neurophysiologists now know that art, meditation, and healing all come from the same source in the body; they are all associated with similar brainwave patterns and mind-body changes.⁷

THE HISTORY OF CREATIVITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN HEALING

The healing power of art and prayer has been known throughout history. In fact, the first healing was conducted through music and dance in hunter-gatherer cultures, freeing what the Kalahari Bushmen called *boiling energy*.¹² The process was seen as sacred, part of the spiritual life of the community and tribe. Each night, certain people would dance wildly and go into a trance or meditative state, believing that the dance itself freed their healing energy. Eventually, music and dance were combined with costumes, storytelling, symbolic objects, and paintings in a ritual that would now be called theater or performance art. In ancient times, however, this ritual was sacred and part of the culture's medicine or healing heritage.

In a very real way, the first artist, the first religious figure, and the first healer were one figure in society—the shaman.¹³ The shaman embodied the original, spontaneous rituals and made them intentional. Historically, many art forms have also supported the principle that meditating on images or listening to certain sounds allows people to reconnect with the most essential aspects of themselves that need healing.¹⁴ In Navaho tradition, a patient was laid on the ground while the medicine man made a sand painting around the body, chanting and telling a traditional Navaho healing story. This ceremony, along with the painting's shapes and colors, was believed to evoke a sacred entity who would bring healing energy to the individual's spirit. Today, researchers have

learned that Navahos still using sand painting as a medicinal practice are able to heal some conditions that Western medicine cannot cure.²

Furthermore, many cultures believed that art healed the world, not just the individual. Art and music were believed powerful enough to positively influence the hunt, crops, weather, fertility, life of the tribe, and the earth. A current medical parallel to this is to change the hospital environment with art, gardens, fountains, and meditation rooms, creating relaxing rooms for nurses and patients to experience renewal. Florence Nightingale charged the nursing profession to do just this, to create healing environments as part of professional practice, as she writes in *Notes on Nursing*:

What nursing has to do is put the patient in the best condition for nature to act upon him. I have seen, in fevers, the most acute suffering produced from the patient not being able to see out of the window, and the small knots in the wood being the only view. I shall never forget the rapture of fever patients over a bunch of bright-colored flowers.

IMPLEMENTING CREATIVITY IN NURSING PRACTICE

Twenty years of research into the effect of music and other arts on patient care shows great benefits for patients. Many nurses have responded by working with artists and musicians to heal people of all ages with conditions ranging from depression to cancer and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.^{11,12,15} Hospitals worldwide are incorporating music and art into patient care,^{9,15} and the most sophisticated university health care centers are now creating Arts In Medicine programs that invite artists and musicians to work with patients and literally change the hospital environment.

Nurses are discovering the profound healing effects that art, writing, music, dance, and poetry and spiritual tools (eg, guided imagery and prayer) have on patients. Sometimes described as spirit-body healing experiences, these effects include heightened energy, compassion, enhanced self-understanding and insight, together with physiologic healing effects.¹⁶ Still, there are many neglected opportunities to integrate music and other creative interventions into daily hospital life; because nurses play a crucial role, they are in the best position to act as agents of creative change.

ASSESSING THE PATIENT'S CREATIVE RESOURCES

From a nurse's first contact with patients, opportunity exists to engage them in the world of art. During initial contact, which usually includes an assessment (collecting data on the patient's chief complaint, disease symptoms, and treatment), the nurse can ask patients what creative activities they include in their lives. Do they paint, write, quilt, dance, or garden? What kinds of activities do they initiate that make them feel good and allow self-expression? For example, a nurse might discover that a middle-aged patient, newly diagnosed with breast cancer and suicidally depressed, used to love painting when in high school. The nurse can *encourage, encourage, encourage* this woman to renew her love affair with color and shape by supplying the materials, listening to possible fears or objections, sharing her own creativity stories, and providing lavishly positive feedback about the patient's artwork. It may be difficult to believe that such a simple, cost-effective intervention can mobilize powerful healing energy in a patient, yet it usually does and in no small measure.

HOW NURSES CAN IMPLEMENT SPECIFIC ART MEDIA IN A CLINICAL SETTING

Music

As the most accessible and most researched medium,¹⁷⁻²¹ music has been shown to decrease anxiety and pain.^{17,21} Music interventions can prove helpful to almost anyone, and nurses can make music a part of the patient's healthcare experience in endlessly innovative ways. For example, a nurse can encourage women in labor or people going through stressful procedures to bring a CD player or a Walkman with music that makes them feel good and helps them relax. Nurses can advise surgical patients, when appropriate, to bring CD players and play them during surgery and in recovery. Music can be used in the recovery room, labor room, neonatal intensive care, and other places. It is as easy as asking patients what their favorite music is and allowing them to play it on a CD player equipped with earphones. A nurse can make music available in a CD or tape library on every unit. Community musicians can be invited into the unit as strolling minstrels, and nurses who like to sing can sing to patients while caring for them.

Drawing

Implementing the visual arts for patients can be done in various ways. For example, nurses can encourage patients, especially those with chronic pain, to use drawing pads and colored pencils. Patients can be encouraged to exhibit their art in their hospital rooms or they can display the art (with permission) in clinical areas. For example, one oncology nurse at Shands, University of Florida, keeps art materials in a drawer on her unit, routinely supplying materials to her patients and hanging their completed artwork in the unit. Another nurse in a neonatal intensive care unit took photographs of her hand holding a premature baby's hand. These photos, which illustrate touch and caring, were exhibited beautifully in the unit and added subtle, inspirational messages of hope, bonding, nurturing, constancy, and the miracle of new life.^{8,9} Any type art can be displayed in a unit to enhance the mood and appearance of the work environment. Artists may be invited to conduct powerful workshops in which staff acknowledge their creative ability and make art to relieve stress or honor patients who have died (as memorials). In this way, nurses experience the artistic process and deepen their understanding of how it may help heal their patients. Nurses can also encourage the hospital to create views (eg, a wall mural of children's pictures) and to employ color and imagery on the basis of patient and family feedback. Plus, it requires no special training to acknowledge patients' drawings as nonverbal forms of communication. To better learn about the patient's attitudes, goals, fears, and pain, nurses can ask the patient questions about the content of the displayed drawings.

Dance

To promote healing, patients need to move; being bedridden is dangerous. Dance promotes healthy movement that builds on the intuitive flow of the body's natural rhythms. Dance is merely intentional movement that may be interesting, stimulating, and attitude enhancing; a simple vehicle for encouraging people to move in safe and creative ways. In this respect, *dance* is defined as any intended, creative movement. As a treatment modality to facilitate the necessary movement after surgery, nurses can coax patients to safely extend themselves, inviting them like dance partners to engage in appropriate levels of fluid movement, perhaps using music to motivate their

responses. For patients having difficulty moving out of bed, scarves, paper fans, or streamers can be supplied to wave in time with the music. Nurses can also visualize themselves as dancers when providing care. The most ungainly of us can be transformed through even occasionally envisioning ourselves as coordinated, precise, flexible, vitally creative beings. Daily *dancing* could prove an uplifting, attitude-changing, and energizing experience for both patient and nurse.

Journals

Encouraging patients to write a journal about their own experiences as part of daily practice allows them to document their lives and express themselves creatively. It gives patients some control and helps them gain insight about the progression, not only of their illness but of their perceptions about the illness; adjustments they have made; stages of understanding, acceptance, and grief they have come through; and personal growth achieved as a direct result of these processes.

THE NURSE AS WITNESS

The nurse is witness to every level of the healing experience as it unfolds. Because the nurse is there at night, in the morning, with the family, and at the bedside, she can be there at the moment of opportunity to introduce art as a way of healing. The nurse is the essential doorway, the guide who, even more than the artist, invites the patient to make art. If art is to be part of the clinical practice of nursing, the nurse can change the face of healthcare. The Art in Medicine program at Shands Hospital was created from the nursing framework of care.^{8,9,22} Nurses are discovering ways they can care for the whole person through creative interventions because art and meditation automatically put patients into the place where healing flows. Whether painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, or writing in a journal, the most important event is for the patient to enter into the realm where mind-body healing occurs.

One of the most remarkable aspects of using art and music for healing is the simplicity of the process. Everyone has made art, colored in coloring books, or danced and played music as children, and many people go to concerts and museums or listen to music

as adults. Art is a path toward healing that is far easier than guided imagery or meditation, and it accomplishes the same thing. Art and music are naturally healing by themselves, so a holistic nurse does not have to do anything that may feel foreign or uncomfortable, such as reading from a guided imagery script or trying to teach patients basic principles of meditation. That is why the creative arts have been so successful in hospitals. Creativity and spirituality allow nurses to transform healing and change nursing care.

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