

Art Therapy Experience

Adam sat next to my hospital bed with me and my bottles of blood in a carrier bag, draining my wound, the morning after surgery. I could barely lift my arm. I painted gowns and tubes.

Adam sat next to me in the art therapy room with my sick bowl under the table. I'd thrown up in the park on the way here and was trying to stay very still to avoid vomiting again. I painted a vomit picture with my hands.

In the Macmillan kitchen, Adam and a small changing group of cancer affecteds gathered over and over again. I used paint and pastels and charcoal and pencils. I decorated sick bowls and sellotaped hospital name bands. I drew animals and flowers and my body and hospital scenes and shapes and it doesn't matter what. We shared our stories and secrets and thoughts and silences and tears and the work we created. Too often I was vaguely delirious with exhaustion or pain or nausea. I was bald or bruised or dripping with sweat from sudden hot flushes; clinging on to my chair and shivering with tiredness. We drank tea and eventually, many months later, I was well enough to make the tea.



1 Art therapy image

Cancer treatment was hellish. Cancer itself was and is terrifying. Art therapy made it into something different; something I could survive and learn from. The experience forced a giant pause in my life. My year and a half of treatment included trying out many of the hospital machines to make a diagnosis, followed by mastectomy, implant, removal of lymph nodes, six rounds of chemotherapy, two surprise hospital admissions, twenty five days of radiotherapy and a year of three weekly herceptin infusions. I needed help just to keep going; to keep showing up and taking it and

swallowing down the side effects. At its worst, I wasn't able to work or be a mother or sometimes just be a person and eat or leave the house or have a conversation. For this year and a half, I wasn't me. Art therapy helped me survive the experience and keep hold of me, or at least keep hold of my new me and new normal.

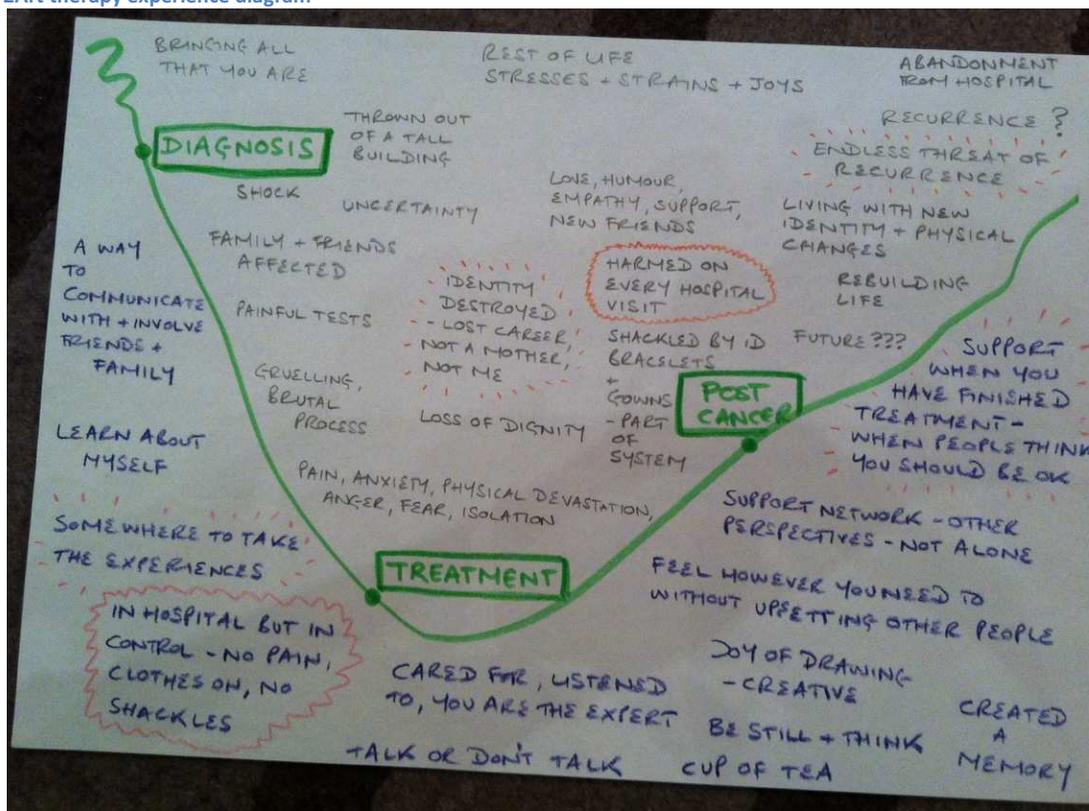
In a situation where I had very little control over my body, my time, my treatment or my relationship with the hospital, art therapy became vital. At its peak, every time I visited the hospital I was harmed. An injection, a needle, a needle into multiple veins once my veins gave up, cut (surgery), poisoned (chemo), burnt (radiotherapy), adverse reactions, vomiting, nausea, anticipatory nausea, discomforts and pains; minor indignity after minor indignity. Often I would have to wear a hospital gown and be prodded and poked and stared at. Art therapy was at the hospital but within it my body was my own. Art therapy didn't hurt or harm me. I was fully clothed and not manhandled.

The timeliness alone of the session was essential. With hospital appointments I would frequently lose hours waiting for doctors or nurses or for drugs to arrive. I would be sent off to other departments or told to wait for other professionals. Art therapy was at the hospital but it started and finished on time, as expected, every time. There was no uncertainty. I could choose to attend or not. I could talk or not talk. Draw or not draw. Stay or leave. Share or not share. It was part of my treatment yet a part that I had some kind of control over and that had some kind of respect for me.

The session was a place that I could take my anger and anxieties and self pity and guilt and cancer comedy and treatment horror stories to feel however I needed to. My family and friends were upset and freaked out by the whole experience too so they couldn't really cope with my feelings as well. I was able to meet people for whom cancer was also central and therefore something they wanted to discuss but who were not personally affected by my feelings or the big changes in my life. I was free to feel how I wanted. Within the group it was fascinating and heartbreaking to meet other people affected by cancer. Everyone has a different story and everyone reacts very differently. This then became a learning experience about cancer and about myself and who I am and how I behave. It also became a support network with people who didn't know me as someone who did anything (through my career, family, education or hobbies), they knew me just as a person.

At work I have always been a prolific doodler and I make lots of pictures with my children but it had been years since I had made a picture for me. I don't know when I had last made a picture that was received without judgement as it was in art therapy. The picture doesn't matter. It isn't good or bad. It is a process and a product that can be shared and discussed, or not. It was wonderful to be free to make a picture however I wished to and fulfilling to create something. Over and over again I met new group participants that had not picked up a brush or a pencil since school. There is a moment of uncertainty and then they become absorbed. Whatever they have created has meaning for them and is shared with us. Pictures referencing each other around the room and stories overlapping or jarring with each other. There is often pride and satisfaction or self judgement along with all the unearthed emotions. For an hour and a half we have been part of a special experience, connected with each other and created something.

2 Art therapy experience diagram



Slowly I have been rebuilding my life and my strength and managing the recurrence anxiety. The pictures for me started to leave the art therapy session and take on a new significance. I had created a visual memory of the experience. I have visceral reactions to the pictures and can relive and remember where I have been and how far I have come. From this I created a photobook which gave me a way to talk about what had happened with other people, those who have lived cancer or those who knew me and didn't know how to bring the subject up. I had an exhibition of my pictures at a local cafe and started giving talks to people at the hospital and student nurses at university. The pictures became a way to communicate with and educate others. They helped people see cancer and cancer patients differently. They helped people to see the power of art therapy during treatment and for the long, slow journey back from treatment. I created this diagram, perhaps another art therapy image, to explain how art therapy supported me throughout my treatment and beyond. The green line represents the progression of the treatment. The black words show the hospital experience and the blue words show the art therapy experience.

I have photographed and printed one of my pictures from art therapy and hung it on my living room wall as a memorial. It is of my new post-surgery and post-cancer breasts. It is colourful and full of life and also horribly painful. It reminds us of the cancer treatment experience and what we have learnt from it and how we made it into something beautiful and memorable and colourful.



3 Memorial picture