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Coloring can help cancer patients cope with stress

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Sandy Gantt receives infusions of chemotherapy to treat her leukemia for hours on end, day after day. But she's found one thing that transports her from that reality to a less stressful place.

"Coloring is a nice, soothing distraction from treatment," she said, shading an intricate mandala design. "I get lost in it, and it gets me away from my worries."

Sandy's participating in the UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center's new staff-driven initiative to help patients manage stress during cancer treatment. In addition to movies and cards offered to help pass time, patients can now pick up coloring supplies and pages from adult coloring books. The books feature a rich assortment of pre-drawn patterns, from abstract and geometric drawings to unique nature scenes and holiday-themed designs, and provide hours of mindful, calm and creative expression.

Sold by the millions, the coloring books are the latest anti-stress trend and, according to experts, help people in many settings, providing relief for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, helping inmates manage aggressive behavior, as well as alleviating signs of stress and depression in college students.

Coloring reduces stress by activating the brain's right hemisphere, explains Kathleen Lorain, an art therapist who facilitates creative projects at the UC Davis Medical Center to help pediatric patients, their siblings and parents cope with stress.

"When we are stressed or worried, we activate the left side of our brain, which is responsible for analytical and cognitive processes," she added. "But when we color, we switch gears and access the right side of the brain, the creative, artistic region," which quiets the left part, allows creativity to take over and blocks out worries.

Like meditation, coloring promotes relaxation by focusing the brain on the present moment.

"When patients color, they engage in the 'here and now' and practice mindfulness, which can be a very meditative and relaxing process," Lorain said. "Because they're occupied with thoughts such as 'what color do I use?' and 'how should I color this part?,' their right brain can relax and give them a break from difficult thoughts about procedures, their diagnosis, pain and the like. Art is a nonverbal way of processing all of these difficult feelings."

And like many activities that require creativity, coloring can boost self-esteem and generate positive feelings.

"Facilitating the art-making process provides an opportunity for patients to create something, increasing self-esteem and returning control back to the patient," Lorain added, which is critical in the clinical setting where patients can feel powerless and unproductive.

Each month, the Adult Infusion Center also organizes a coloring contest for patients and families. Winning pages are selected by patients and staff and displayed in the unit.

Source:

UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center
