

RESEARCH BASED TEMPLATE

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Pilot Study: Exploring the Effects of Group Art Therapy on Emotional Expression, Social Support, and Isolation in Young People with Cancer

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Background:

Adolescents and young adults (AYAs; 15–25 years) with cancer face profound psychosocial challenges including social isolation, identity disruption, and emotional distress. Conventional psychosocial supports often fail to meet their developmental needs. Art therapy offers a creative, non-verbal pathway for emotional expression and peer connection, yet limited evidence exists for structured *group* interventions within Australian oncology contexts. This pilot study evaluated whether group art therapy could reduce perceived isolation and enhance social support among AYAs undergoing cancer treatment.

Methods:

A four-week mixed-methods pilot was delivered at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital You Can Youth Cancer Centre. Six participants attended weekly 2–2.5-hour group art-therapy sessions facilitated by a Masters of Mental Health & Art Therapy candidate. Quantitative data were collected pre- and post-intervention using the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale; qualitative reflections explored participants' experiences of social connection and emotional expression. Paired-sample t-tests examined pre-/post-changes, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified emergent psychosocial themes.

Results:

Preliminary analysis indicated a statistically significant reduction in loneliness scores ($t(5)=4.72$, $p = .005$, $d = 1.93$), demonstrating a large effect size. Qualitative data revealed three dominant themes: *shared understanding*, *creative belonging*, and *safe emotional expression*. Participants described the sessions as "a space to feel normal again" and highlighted ongoing peer relationships formed beyond the program.

Conclusion:

Group art therapy appears to be a feasible and effective intervention for enhancing social support and reducing isolation among AYAs with cancer. The integration of creative, peer-based approaches into oncology care may address critical psychosocial gaps and improve holistic wellbeing. Findings support further large-scale evaluation and the inclusion of credentialed art therapists within multidisciplinary AYA cancer services.

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Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This study was conducted independently as part of the Master of Mental Health (Art Therapy) program at The University of Queensland. The project received in-kind support from the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital and the RWH Foundation through access to facilities and participant recruitment assistance. No pharmaceutical or commercial funding was received in the development or implementation of this research.