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Research

The Art of Human Caring: Healing Through Creativity and Connection and a Little Color Outside the Lines

By

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Abstract

Healthcare often focuses heavily on tasks, outcomes, and efficiency, yet healing is much more than physical treatment alone. In healthcare environments that are often fast-paced and emotionally demanding, art can create opportunities for reflection, connection, and comfort. This reflective article explores the relationship between art, healing, and human caring within nursing and nursing education. Drawing from experiences in healthcare, education, and community arts involvement, this article discusses how creativity and artistic expression may help restore compassion, support emotional well-being, and create more meaningful healing environments for patients, nurses, students, and communities.

Introduction

Nursing has always been both a science and an art. We rely on evidence-based practice, clinical judgment, and technical skills, but some of the most meaningful moments in healthcare happen through simple human connection. A comforting conversation, sitting quietly with someone during a difficult diagnosis, or helping a patient feel truly seen and heard can leave a lasting impact long after clinical interventions are forgotten.

Over time, however, healthcare has become increasingly fast-paced and task driven. Nurses, educators, and students are often balancing heavy workloads, endless documentation, technology updates, and constant pressure to do more in less time.

Some days it can feel as though healthcare professionals spend almost as much time clicking boxes as caring for people. In many settings, there is little room left for reflection, creativity, or emotional restoration. As a result, many healthcare professionals feel emotionally exhausted and disconnected from the deeper purpose that first drew them to nursing (West et al., 2018).

In many ways, this is where art and human caring naturally intersect. Art creates space for people to slow down, breathe, reflect, express emotion, and reconnect with themselves and others. Whether through painting, music, storytelling, photography, writing, or community art, creativity reminds us of our shared humanity. Art and caring are deeply connected because both center around presence, connection, meaning, and healing (Watson, 2008). Sometimes healing begins not with a medication or procedure, but with simply feeling understood.

Art as a Form of Healing

Healing does not always happen through medications or procedures alone. Sometimes healing begins when a person feels safe, valued, emotionally supported, or simply less alone. Art has the ability to foster those experiences in ways that words alone sometimes cannot. Creative expression often allows people to communicate emotions that feel difficult to explain within traditional conversations or clinical encounters.

Many individuals naturally turn to creativity during times of stress, grief, uncertainty, or transition. Art provides an outlet for emotional expression while also creating moments of peace and reflection in environments that otherwise feel overwhelming. Research continues to

support the connection between art and healing. Creative engagement has been associated with reduced stress, emotional expression, improved coping, and enhanced well-being across diverse populations (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

Within healthcare, art may help patients process difficult experiences while also supporting nurses and healthcare professionals experiencing emotional fatigue and burnout. Simple creative practices such as reflective journaling, painting, storytelling, music, or creating healing spaces within healthcare environments can encourage mindfulness, emotional connection, and resilience. These practices do not replace evidence-based care; rather, they complement it by addressing emotional and relational aspects of healing that are equally important to well-being.

For nursing students and educators, creativity may also help restore meaning and connection within learning environments that can sometimes become heavily focused on performance, deadlines, and outcomes. Human caring reminds us that education is not simply about transferring knowledge; it is also about supporting growth, connection, and the development of compassionate professionals (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2021). Interestingly, some of the best conversations and moments of reflection often happen when people are creating something together rather than sitting through another PowerPoint presentation.

Human Caring and Creativity

Watson's Human Caring Theory emphasizes authentic presence, compassion, relationship-centered care, and the creation of healing environments (Watson, 2008). These ideas align naturally with artistic expression and creativity. Both art and

human caring encourage individuals to pause, listen, reflect, and connect more deeply with the human experience. They remind healthcare professionals that healing involves emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions in addition to physical care.

Narrative reflection and storytelling also allow healthcare professionals to process experiences, strengthen empathy, and foster trust within patient relationships (Charon, 2001). In many ways, art helps preserve the emotional and relational aspects of healthcare that can sometimes become overshadowed within highly task-oriented systems. Creativity encourages reflection, mindfulness, and emotional awareness, all of which are essential components of compassionate care.

Community involvement in the arts can also strengthen healing and connection outside of traditional healthcare settings. Local art organizations create opportunities for people to gather, share experiences, express creativity, and build meaningful relationships. These spaces often foster belonging, emotional support, and community well-being in ways that feel deeply restorative. As healthcare professionals, we sometimes underestimate the importance of beauty, creativity, and reflection, yet these experiences can restore hope, reduce stress, and remind people they are more than a diagnosis, workload, or role.

In small rural communities, art has a unique way of bringing people together. Community art events and local art guilds create spaces where people can slow down, connect, share stories, and simply enjoy being around others. Over time, it becomes clear that many individuals quietly carry difficult burdens, whether it is cancer, Alzheimer's disease, chronic illness, caregiving responsibilities, the sudden loss

of a loved one, or grief in its many forms. In many ways, these gatherings become more than just art shows or creative activities; they offer encouragement, conversation, belonging, and moments of peace during difficult seasons of life. At a time when so many people feel isolated or overwhelmed, even small community-centered creative spaces can provide meaningful connection and healing.

One woman I met through our local art community, whom we will call Milly to protect her privacy, shared with me how art became an important part of her healing journey after being diagnosed with breast cancer. She granted permission for her story to be shared, and identifying details have been modified to protect confidentiality. She originally joined art classes simply to spend time with her sister and learn something new. Not long afterward, at just forty years old she received a breast cancer diagnosis and suddenly found herself navigating appointments, surgeries, recovery, and the uncertainty that so often accompanies serious illness.

As Milly moved through treatment, art became a steady presence in her life. Each class gave her something to look forward to and something positive to focus on when much of her energy was consumed by medical decisions and physical recovery. For a few hours, she could set aside the role of patient and simply be herself. She found comfort in the creative process and discovered that painting brought a sense of peace during a season that often felt overwhelming. What stands out is not only the artwork she created, but the relationships that developed along the way.

Through shared conversations, encouragement, and the simple act of creating together, she found connection

during a time when it would have been easy to feel isolated. In many ways, this reflects the heart of human caring. Healing is not always found in treatments and procedures alone. Sometimes it is found in feeling seen, supported, and valued by others.

Reclaiming the Human Side of Healthcare

Healthcare will always require scientific knowledge, technical skill, and evidence-based practice. However, nursing must continue to protect the human side of care as well. Compassion, presence, empathy, and connection remain essential to healing. Patients may not always remember every clinical detail, but they often remember how they were treated and how they felt during vulnerable moments.

Art may not solve every challenge facing healthcare, but it can help create spaces where people feel calmer, more connected, and more emotionally supported. It reminds us to slow down, notice one another, and reconnect with the meaning behind our work.

When Milly reflects on that time in her life, she speaks about how art helped her regain a sense of purpose, joy, and hope. Her experience reminds us that caring often happens in unexpected places. A room full of paintbrushes, conversation, laughter, and creativity may not look like healthcare, yet it can create the conditions for healing. As

nurses, we often focus on what we can do for people, but experiences like this remind us of the importance of simply being present and creating spaces where connection can flourish. Those moments of connection are at the very heart of human caring. In many ways, both nursing and art ask us to do the same thing: to truly see another human being. That ability to see, connect, and care is at the heart of human caring.

Conclusion

Art and human caring share a common purpose: creating connection, meaning, and healing. As healthcare systems continue to evolve, nurses and educators have an opportunity to intentionally preserve these human elements within practice and education. Creativity, reflection, and compassion should not be viewed as secondary to healthcare, but rather as essential parts of holistic healing.

Healing is not always found in major moments. Sometimes it is found in reflection, creativity, compassion, and the simple reminder that people need connection just as much as they need treatment. Art helps create space for that kind of healing to occur, and nursing should continue to embrace its value within caring and professional practice. Perhaps healthcare does not always need more noise, speed, or productivity. Sometimes it may simply need a little more humanity and maybe even a little more color.

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As a doctoral prepared nurse educator, I enjoy creating meaningful learning experiences that connect theory to practice. My teaching experience includes online, face-to-face, skills lab, clinical, and simulation environments. I'm especially passionate about using evidence-based approaches to strengthen nursing education and student success.

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