



**COPING WITH CANCER
THROUGH IMAGERY
AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION**

Jan Taal

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Imagery and artistic expression offer a ‘non-verbal voice’, a medium for the irrational and our greater self, source of our potentials and creativity, thereby doing justice to what lives within us and enabling us to rediscover and renew ourselves.

People who are confronted with cancer come to the realization that they are not as safe and invincible as they believed themselves to be when in full health.

Their fundamental feelings of invulnerability and security are threatened and their experience of control over their own lives, their autonomy, their self-confidence, their sense of meaning, all the vital major components of happiness and wellbeing, are often seriously undermined.

Shock, panic, grief, powerlessness, fear and anger are all natural responses in the face of this and alongside the bodily impairment itself and the chronic fatigue, scarring and other permanent physical effects of the disease and its treatment, there are all kinds of consequences for family and relationships, for work and for future prospects and perspective.

For many people, cancer means a totally unexpected confrontation with their own mortality, leading them towards a most intimate meeting with themselves. There is no prescription which indicates how to handle this process, how to deal with difficult emotions and how to move towards a future which is so often shrouded in uncertainty. What can however be of great help in this process is the use of imagery and artistic expression to access and enhance inner strength and resilience.

Expressing emotions and needs in any kind of artistic form - drawing, painting, sculpting, modelling, writing, singing, playing, movement and dance, facilitate the release of new energy, may bring balance and revive a sense of autonomy.

Evoking imagery and making art have always been an integral part of human behaviour and probably constitute the very oldest forms of healing. At least as long as 40.000 years ago we have evidence of art and the ritual use of imagery.¹ Imagery and art are not only one of the defining characteristics of the human species, but are essential for identity and the development of mental, social and physical skills.²

Sheikh and Assagioli, two of the most significant writers in the field of imagery and therapy, both name imagination as a core-function of the psyche. The imagination is one of the most influential spontaneous functions of the human psyche in that it gives access to the creative domain, where we experience the greatest freedom and which offers us a powerful source of inspiration. Sheikh defines imagination as the central arena within which the personal identity is formed and also where access can be found to an often startling capacity for problem-solving and to deep sources of creativity.³

In the case of illness, imagery and artistic expression may help to lead to an enhanced quality of life and a strengthened sense of meaning, to improved interpersonal communication and to a reduction in feelings of anxiety, fatigue, stress, pain and depression. In the case of cancer, clinical evidence shows that imagery and art can help to increase inner resources of strength and resilience.⁴

The many studies on the placebo effect also show that expectations –imagining ‘this pill helps’ – can alleviate and relieve physical symptoms. Humans possess some kind of innate self-reinforcing capacity.⁵

Within neuropsychology the discovery of mirror-neurons has confirmed the central role played by the imagination in learning processes as well as in recuperation after injury.⁶

That which we imagine, paint, model or sing is represented and activated in our brain and this stimulates corresponding behaviour. The advertising and pornography industries are only too aware of this; on the other hand, motor imaging is also applied widely in the world of rehabilitation and sport. Motor imagery for instance, has become a novel method in stroke rehabilitation.⁷

To summarize: creative expression offers a ‘non-verbal voice’, a medium for the irrational, the unsay-able and the incomprehensible, thereby doing justice to what lives within us and enabling us to re-discover ourselves. The lost emotional and psychological balance can be re-found or built anew. Actively expressing ourselves empowers us and powerlessness transforms into a certain degree of control and inner strength.⁸

Illustrations

Confronted with life-threatening cancer, Dinie Kanters-Schreuders sculpted a figure that meant a very great deal to her.

Through her work Dinie is saying ‘Yes, there is despair, sorrow, and cancer, but I exist’, with the ‘I’ expressed as an exclamation mark!

After her death her family placed the statue on her grave and for them it has a particularly special meaning, giving them much comfort and consolation.



Despair – Sadness – Cancer – I! Dinie Kanters-Schreuders. ⁹

When contact is made on a feeling level with an image, a kind of natural trance-like state may occur and the image can become 'pregnant', revealing deeper qualities and potentials, but unresolved issues as well.

Cis Bouten was torn with doubt: should I fight the disease or should I accept it? She could not reconcile the two.



Fighting against cancer,
but it does not seem to
affect the cancer cells



Acceptance



"The two halves, acceptance or fight, don't match, I don't feel whole. I'm a person torn in two. When I put the two halves together, I feel like a tiny baby falling into a deep back hole, and yet the shafts of sunlight still penetrate through."



“By painting the embryo and the child’s head, I am surprised to discover the child inside me. On the one hand this is the crushed child I used to be and on the other hand it’s the child I would so much like to have had. I feel that I need to give her attention, to spoil and pamper her.”

Cis Bouten ¹⁰



Irma van der Meer expressed her ambivalent feelings in a small female figure made of cloth, paint and electric wire. She writes this about it:

“My arms stretch forward in search of support, but at the same time they keep the world at bay. My hands reach for help, and yet push others away. A disfigured body trying to find the balance between staying and leaving, between asking for love and rejecting it. Life pushing through death and destruction.” ¹¹



Hester Rahusen painted her capacity to bear what is happening to her in a imagery session. *“I carry the yoke and my life upon it”*, as she describes it. It gives her strength.¹²



In a completely different way Clara Tameling draws her own coping capacity.

*“I have this extraordinary feeling: For the first time in my life I am going on a journey all by myself and I don’t know which way the path will lead me, this path which has a fork in it, to life or to death. I am prepared to go along this path and I feel support and trust.”*¹³



Others use their imagination to help them to cope with their medical treatment. Toos Koedam painted a goddess who comforts her during her radiotherapy.¹⁴



*"I am sitting quietly on my bench while friend 'Chemo' is doing his work. I have asked him to do as little as possible harm to my good cells."*¹⁵

Hester Rahusen



Marije Smits needed inner strength to cope with her cancer and the recent loss of her mother. She struggled with fear and excessive self-control. But then she was able to paint in a way she had never done before. Through her painting she experienced the release of an enormous primal force.

“Finally I was able to let go of fear and found courage and trust.”

Singing for Your Life Choirs

In order to promote artistic expression to enable better ways of coping with cancer on a larger national scale, we established the foundation ‘Cancer in Images’ in 1997. Since then this organization has been initiating exhibitions, ateliers, art, drama and writing courses, choirs and research throughout the Netherlands.¹⁶



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In 2003 the first choir ‘Singing for Your Life’ was established.¹⁷ It has become a stunning success. Patients and their friends, relatives and carers gather fortnightly and sometimes even weekly, to sing under the direction of a voice-coach and a conductor. I often participate myself in one of the ‘Singing for Your Life’ choirs and it has been a revelation for me: the solidarity and joy is extraordinary.

The development of the choirs has been truly phenomenal. Throughout the Netherlands there are now 32 of these choirs.¹⁸

It is obvious that there is an extraordinary expressiveness in these 'Singing for Your Life' choirs which offers true comfort, support and inspiration to the participants who have so much in common.



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Apart from the fact that singing and music-making have of themselves a particularly healing effect, these choirs are also characterized by their spirit of togetherness, their solidarity and the implicit shared knowledge about 'what cancer does to you' and all this seems to offer great support and empowerment to all of those involved.

Scientific research studies have recently been able to confirm these effects.¹⁹



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Some quotes from choir-members

“Cancer plays a large part in the life of each one of us. Sometimes we talk about it, other times not. But we can certainly feel it when we sing and it gives a greater emotional impact to all the songs. It’s not uncommon for us to get goosebumps!”

“Everyone can join in, you don’t have to have singing experience. Every voice is good enough and every contribution is welcome. We are a choir of friends who support one another through thick and thin. Singing with energy, emotion and group-feeling is at the heart of our choir. We make music that touches people and we do this by singing songs which mean something to us. Cancer doesn’t have to mean that the song is ending, it can also mean the beginning of a new song or for that matter of a whole new repertoire.”



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Since 2010 a number of choirs have been set up in Wales, with similar levels of success. Researchers from the School of Healthcare Studies at Cardiff University have studied the effects of singing on the quality of life experienced by the members of a ‘Singing for Life’ choir of Tenovus.²⁰ In a pilot study a broad spectrum of physiological and psychological factors were tested. The results revealed a striking level of improvement in the vitality, the social performance and the general state of mental wellbeing of the participants, accompanied by a reduction in pain symptoms. Indications of reduction in anxiety and depressive symptoms were also found. Participants felt uplifted and had greater confidence and self-esteem.²¹

The research team has more recently completed a large-scale follow-up study involving around 1000 choir members and the results of this study confirm the findings of the initial pilot study. The study found significant improvements in levels of vitality, social functioning, general mental wellbeing and reduction in levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms and pain. The results of this large-scale research study is currently being prepared for publication.

Imagery Toolbox

In the attempt to make imagery and artistic expression easily accessible for those who are confronted with cancer or other chronic diseases, the so-called 'Imagery Toolbox' has been developed by this author for the School for Imagery in Amsterdam in collaboration with the Foundation Cancer in Images and the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht.



The toolbox contains a great variety of imagery exercises to help people with illness to mobilize their self-strengthening potential, to help them cope with the illness, to use as support during treatment and to increase stamina, resilience and a sense of wellness. The toolbox comprises: 60 symbolic photographs, 10 audio imagery exercises on 2 CDs (imagery of the safe, good place; healing; the source; inner light; support during treatment, relief of pain, loving care for the impaired body), CD 'Music with Heart and Soul', drawing and writing material and an extensive User Manual. The exercises in the toolbox are simple and are described in step-by-step detail in the manual.²²

An example of working with a symbol card

Cancer-patient Maria chooses from the 60 symbol cards the photograph of a flower to meet her need. The manual in the toolbox instructs her to watch the flower carefully for a while and then to close her eyes. She is instructed to wait and to watch how the image evolves.



“I see it becomes a tree, she says. It is my tree and it can grow. I myself am sitting at the bottom of the tree and I want to go upwards. It’s the little rounds that rise (in the drawing). If I stay under the ground, scared, maybe I will feel safe but nothing will happen. Standing still is no life. I can grow and blossom. She hangs the drawing in her living room so that she can see it. It strengthens her to think ‘This is what I’m going for, I will not stay in my fear’.”



For more about the Imagery Toolbox, watch the video (13 minutes) in which six individuals show and explain how working with the toolbox has helped them: <https://vimeo.com/116460986>

Researchers of the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht conducted a pilot study on the effects of working with the Imagery Toolbox. The results showed that the toolbox stimulates the imagination powerfully and mobilizes the mental healing potential of the participants.²³

A large research project on the effectiveness of the toolbox is currently in preparation.

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Credits

Capital Photos Schiphol *Amsterdam: p. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

Jan Taal: photo p. 8.

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