

Origami: Inspiring minds in hospital

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Abstract

Over the past decade I have worked as a Creative Specialist with adults undergoing treatment for cancer. I offer adults engaging and inspiring conversation, and encourage participants to become actively involved in activity which is meaningful to them. After working with over 1,500 people, I have collected feedback to reveal the impact of sessions, as well as developing a selection of successful activities to engage adults, including Origami. As part of evaluation patients suggested an overlooked aspect of hospital life: boredom, associated with a lack of hope, motivation or focus, and correlated with depression and higher mortality rates. This talk will focus on Origami as a valuable tool to counteract anxiety and boredom, to bring mental stimulation to lift mood for patients and staff.

Boredom: In the words of one patient a lack of mental stimulation leads to "*focusing on the little things, symptoms, ruminating and catastrophising*". Others describe extreme boredom results in "*feeling low, hopeless*" spiralling towards depression, while getting immersed in something is as "*good as pain relief*".

Activities: I have developed a range of ideas to engage adults away from mind-wandering to enter positive, meaningful conversation and immersive activity. Areas of interest include: doodling, boxes of natural wonders including shells, fossils and a piece of meteorite, and Origami. I was taught Origami by a patient who felt it helped her as a child in hospital in Hong Kong, and wanted me to pass this onto others. Origami has consistently been of most interest as an exciting opportunity, often bringing back happy rebellious memories from school of making paper airplanes, chatterboxes and water bombs. A variety of Origami sculptures have been offered to learn including modular drawing inspiration from the surprising beauty of viruses, to flapping birds, butterflies and making bunches of lasting flowers which are otherwise not allowed in hospital. Origami flowers encourages uplifting conversation away from illness, and communicates care and consideration.

Feedback: Where practical, patients were encouraged to give feedback to learn and improve sessions. Questions include whether a session was helpful, and if so in what way, as well as how did the session make the person feel. A sample of 218 questionnaires reveal the majority found sessions helpful in feeling happier, and preventing thinking about illness.

Origami as a tool: Origami appeals to both sexes and brings motivation, interest, focus and challenge which is suitable for adults to escape from otherwise pervading boredom and

anxiety in hospital. Learning requires close, focused interaction with a clear purpose. Paper folding brings spatial challenge, control, beauty and a sense of wonder into entering a journey as to what will emerge bringing achievement, mental stimulation and happiness. Origami brings patients away from digital media which is often passive and negative, and instead connects to an older tradition where human culture has been transmitted through writing on paper. Folding brings a surprising and novel experience to interact with paper in a different way, and once tried becomes self-motivating.

I would tentatively suggest Origami paper represents mood, starting with feeling flat, to entering a transformation with folds lifting mood and bringing surprise, interest, challenge and motivation. The use of paper to combat boredom and anxiety is ideal for hospitals as clean, cheap and requiring little storage space to improve the mental well-being of patients. National papers including the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail and The Times have helped raise awareness of boredom with Origami as a solution through writing for the British Medical Journal, and starting the Anti-boredom Campaign.

Case studies: Patients waiting for surgery can be particularly keen to distract themselves from the anxiety of waiting and described the boredom and frustration of not being able to focus. In this situation I have found patients wanting to learn complex pieces such as the Kawasaki Rose based on no experience to actively focus the mind away from surgery. Together with qualitative reflections, photos (Figure 1) with consent reveal levels of happiness brought to patients. I have also combined doodling with Origami for patients to see patterns change to express their own individuality.



Figure 1: Use of Origami to lift mood for patients

Dr Lizzie Burns has founded the Anti-boredom Campaign. With thanks to the following for supporting this work: UCH and the UCH Cancer Fund, to the Wellcome Trust and Dr Philippa Matthews in 'Viral Footprints' and Ruth Charity from artlink in NHS Oxford Hospitals, and the Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics, University of Oxford