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# 'A lifestyle coat-hanger': a phenomenological study of the meanings of artwork for women coping with chronic illness and disability

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## ◀mark item

### Key:

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### Abstract:

*Purpose:* The purpose of this phenomenological enquiry was to explore the meanings and functions of art for a group of women living with disabling chronic illness. Participants were recruited on the basis that they considered artwork as central to their current well-being.

*Method:* Thirty women were interviewed and five submitted written narratives. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was carried out.

*Results:* About half of the participants had taken up their preferred artistic occupation since the onset of illness. Participants described their artwork as contributing to their health and well-being in many diverse ways. Art filled occupational voids, distracted thoughts away from illness, promoted the experience of flow and spontaneity, enabled the expression of grief, maintained a positive identity, and extended social networks. Its value was conceptualised by one participant as a 'lifestyle coat-hanger' organising numerous further roles and activities that gave purpose to life. Art was more than cathartic. It offered a versatile means of overcoming the restrictions imposed by illness on self and lifestyle, in many cases creating a more enriched lifestyle than before.

*Conclusion:* The findings may encourage professionals working in health and rehabilitation settings to assist clients in identifying meaningful, creative occupations that are feasible within the limits imposed by illness or injury.

## Abstract

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## Conversations About Creativity and Chronic Illness I: Textile Artists Coping With Long-Term Health Problems Reflect on the Origins of Their Interest in Art

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This qualitative study explored the origins of interest in textile arts among a group of women living with long-term health problems. The part that illness played in motivating engagement in creative arts was of particular concern. Twenty-four women, between 29-72 years old, were interviewed. Most were hobbyists, but the sample included some publicly acclaimed textile artists. A minority had engaged in art continuously since their earlier years. Most of the women had discovered (or rediscovered) textile arts in middle and later life. Several factors facilitated this. The narratives indicated that the women's preexisting resilient personality, as well as extensive support structures, may have encouraged a reflective attitude and a problem-solving approach to living with illness. The experience of biographical disruption, stemming from the crisis of illness, dissatisfaction with unproductive time, and a growing need for self-fulfillment, appeared to create a search for a meaningful occupation. The discovery of textile art as a meaningful occupation (as opposed to other ways of living with illness) appeared to be encouraged by early role models, enjoyment of art at school, the discovery that adult personal and professional interests could be expressed through artwork, and chance events. Textile art at school appeared to provide a form of "cultural capital" for these women, who returned to this art medium and the skills learned earlier when crisis occurred. The findings indicate that a negative event such as illness may have life-enhancing effects. Rehabilitation specialists might focus more on the arts as a resource for adults living with illness.

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