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THE HEALING THREAD



A LOOK INTO OUR WORK
WITH CHILDREN,
CAREGIVERS, AND
EMOTIONAL HEALING

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A NOTE FROM OUR PSYCHO-ONCOLOGIST

It brings me immense joy to introduce this inaugural edition of our CPAA Psycho-Oncology Newsletter - an initiative born from reflection, collaboration, and a deep-rooted commitment to compassionate care.

In the field of psycho-oncology, every conversation matters whether it's a quiet moment of comfort between a counsellor and a caregiver, or a child finding expression through art and play. Through this newsletter, we open a window into the multifaceted world of psychosocial care in oncology, where science meets empathy and healing is often found in the unseen.



This platform has been thoughtfully envisioned and brought to life by our student interns who have immersed themselves in the world of pediatric cancer care, bringing fresh perspectives and heartfelt dedication to every interaction. Their reflections, articles, and creative contributions offer not only insight but also inspiration. In doing so, they remind us that psycho-oncology is not only a profession it is a calling grounded in presence, patience, and purpose.

The goal of this newsletter is to create a space where ideas are exchanged, experiences are honoured, and the evolving field of psycho-oncology is made more visible. It is also a testament to how learning transforms when anchored in service. I hope this becomes a living archive that grows with each edition a mirror to our work, our challenges, and most importantly, our shared hope.

To every intern, professional, caregiver, and reader - thank you for being part of this journey. May this newsletter continue to amplify the many voices that form the heart of psycho-oncological care.

Warmly,

Karishma Pavaskar

Psycho-Oncologist & Expressive Arts Therapy Practitioner
Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA)

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OUR DEPARTMENTS

ADVOCACY AND CANCER SUPPORT

CPAA has advocated for cancer patients' rights, driving policy reform and campaigns like Tobacco-Free Workplaces and Police Stations. It secured affordable access to drugs like Glivec through a Supreme Court battle. Through surveys, counseling, and awareness, it reduced tobacco use among high-risk groups and made healthcare more accessible.

CANCER SCREENING SERVICES

Our aim to create awareness among general public to know about the ill effects of cancer & aware about the early signs of cancer & early detection of cancer to detect cancer at a very early stage to help us to save people's life on time.

PATIENT CARE

The Patient Care Department at CPAA offers holistic support through medical and emotional counseling, nutritional supplements, and financial aid. It ensures dignified, compassionate care throughout treatment. CPAA stands beside every patient like a family.

REHABILITATION

The Rehabilitation Centre empowers patients through personalized care, vocational training, counseling, and ongoing support. After treatment, it helps patients and families regain normalcy with psychological, economic, and social support. It provides resources and guidance for recovery.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND EVENTS

Creating awareness about the activities of CPAA through large scale fundraising Driving the CSR projects and donations for the cancer patients and cancer prevention programs.

CANCER RESEARCH & PREVENTION UNIT

The Cancer Research and Prevention Unit works to prevent cervical cancer—the second most common cancer among Indian women—through awareness, free vaccination, and screening. It conducts advanced research to identify risk markers and improve early detection. The unit combines scientific innovation with equitable healthcare access.

The missing link in Cancer Care



Cancer is not solely a physical illness, but a life-altering experience that affects every dimension of a person's being. Beyond the medical treatments and hospital visits, patients and their families often face emotional upheaval, social challenges, and mental strain that are rarely acknowledged. In India, where healthcare is largely outcome-focused, the psychological impact of cancer is frequently overlooked. This is where psycho-oncology emerges as a vital, yet often underutilised, component of comprehensive cancer care.

What is psycho oncology?

Psycho-oncology is a multidisciplinary field that addresses the emotional, social, and psychological needs of individuals affected by cancer. It differs from general counselling in its deep integration within oncology settings, with interventions tailored specifically to the cancer experience. From diagnosis to treatment, survivorship, and even end-of-life care,

psycho-oncology offers targeted support to both patients and caregivers.

Patients often experience distress, anxiety, depression, isolation, and fear of recurrence. Meanwhile, caregivers—frequently mothers, spouses, or elderly parents—struggle with fatigue, grief, guilt, and burnout. Despite playing a central role in the healing journey, their emotional needs remain under-prioritised within traditional cancer care models.

How It Works: Then and Now

Psycho-oncology in India has come a long way since the early 2000s when emotional support was largely informal—or completely absent—in cancer care. In those days, mental health was often an afterthought, with the focus squarely on physical treatment. A major perspective shift emerged when distress began to be recognized as the “sixth vital sign,” prompting the adoption of structured psychological screening and care alongside clinical measures.

Today, screening tools such as the Distress Thermometer, HADS, and Quality of Life assessments are routinely used to detect emotional strain early. Interventions have expanded to include CBT, mindfulness, narrative and dignity therapies, caregiver education, and culturally attuned support groups—far beyond the days of ad-hoc counselling. Critically, psycho-oncologists now work as integral members of multidisciplinary teams—alongside oncologists, nurses, social workers, and palliative care experts—to ensure that a patient’s emotional, spiritual, and practical needs are addressed. This shift—from reactive, siloed care to proactive, holistic support—is reshaping cancer treatment, treating the human behind the disease, not just the disease itself.

Real-Life Impact

In a busy cancer center in Chennai, a mother sat quietly beside her young child undergoing leukemia treatment. Far from home and emotionally drained, she was trying to stay strong, even as the family faced financial strain and abandonment by her husband. A psycho-oncologist, noticing

her silent distress, began offering gentle, consistent support—through brief counselling, coping strategies, and simply being present. These small acts became her anchor. This is the essence of psycho-oncology: not just addressing mental health, but walking alongside patients and families when they need it most.

Looking Ahead

In India, psycho-oncology is still emerging, but the shift is undeniable. More hospitals, NGOs, and professionals are beginning to see that cancer care must go beyond scans and surgeries. The emotional and psychological wounds—often silent—need space, support, and healing too.

At CPAA, we integrate psycho-social care into every stage of the cancer journey. Our work spans individual counselling, caregiver support, grief and palliative therapy, expressive arts, and mindfulness-based interventions. We collaborate with medical teams to ensure that care is not just clinical—but compassionate.



When You Care for Others, Who Cares for You?

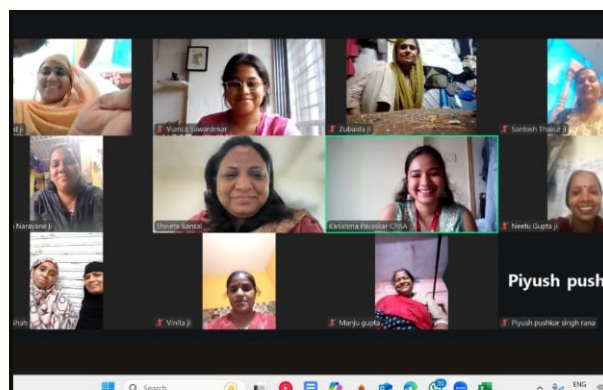


When cancer enters over 14 lakh Indian households each year, it doesn't just affect one person, it transforms the lives of everyone under the same roof. It's not merely a medical crisis, but a shift that reshapes family roles and relationships, with each member carrying invisible burdens. For caregivers, this means navigating treatment, finances, and emotional strain, especially in pediatric cases where children cannot fully grasp their illness.

Research from leading Indian institutions highlights this toll. An AIIMS study found caregivers often experience anxiety, depression, and PTSD, sometimes even more than the patients. In Punjab, 41.6% reported mild to moderate burden, and 11.2% faced moderate to severe levels. Mumbai saw 19.7% and 3.1% respectively. In New Delhi, nearly 43% of caregivers lost jobs due to caregiving duties, deepening financial stress. Yet, support systems for caregivers in India remain limited. This gap calls for safe spaces where caregivers can share, heal, and receive guidance.

To address this, the Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA) launched online caregiver support groups. Held over 12 sessions, these groups use Expressive Arts Therapy to offer emotional relief, validation, and a sense of community to those walking the cancer caregiving journey.

Many parents who come to CPAA's support groups arrive carrying silent burdens. Conversations at first revolve around hospital treatments, finances, and the fear of losing their child. Parents speak of themselves only through their caregiving role, introducing themselves simply as "so-and-so's mother" or "so-and-so's father." Personal interests, feelings, and needs rarely surface. Yet as sessions unfold, a quiet but profound change takes place, and parents begin sharing glimpses of lives beyond caregiving.



Practical changes emerge too. Parents learn simple stretches, grounding exercises, and meditation to ease anxiety. Many express feeling lighter after moving their bodies or speaking their worries aloud.

One mother, when asked what she liked about herself, hesitated before recalling how much she once loved singing. Another held up her silai machine (sewing machine), explaining how it gave her calm and focus. Some shared how watching motivational reels on their phones helped them feel uplifted during dark times. Emotions also shift from hidden to spoken. Where parents once answered "acha" or "theek," they began naming feelings like khushi (happiness), gussa (anger), udaas (sadness), or doshi (guilty).

These words give shape to the storms they endure, from fear at diagnosis to cautious hope when treatment goes well. A powerful moment came when a parent spoke of how, when her daughter was diagnosed, fear consumed the family. She found calm by remembering that the sun rises and sets each day without fail, believing even the darkest moments would pass.



Perhaps the most moving impact is the community that forms. Parents describe how hospital corridors, once places of dread, become spaces of unexpected family. Fellow caregivers share directions, food, and encouragement, transforming loneliness into quiet solidarity. By the end, parents speak not just of their children's futures, but of their own.

They leave with tools to cope, a network of support, and the beginnings of rediscovering who they are. This shift reflects CPAA's mission: to care for the minds and hearts of those who give so much of themselves for their children's healing.



Our Purpose Into Practice

Hospital and Counselling

Facilitating group counselling sessions for patients and their caregivers, providing a supportive environment to address shared concerns, deliver psycho-education, and empower individuals. Additionally, bedside and individual counselling sessions are being conducted to offer personalised emotional support tailored to each patient's needs.

Community Building

Building diverse communities, including psychologists and caregivers, all dedicated to providing comprehensive support for individuals affected by cancer.

Events

Organizing events for caregivers, patients, and cancer survivors to celebrate their journeys and foster a spirit of hope and happiness.

Psycho- Oncology Training Program

Advocating for and spreading awareness about the field of psycho-oncology by designing and delivering training programs and educational sessions in colleges for psychology students.

Research

Conducting ongoing surveys of patients and caregivers who are being supported by CPAA to assess their current psychosocial health. Developing research papers on the use of expressive arts therapy for the paediatric population and on the support groups being conducted for caregivers. Presenting these research findings at international conferences to contribute to the global understanding of psychosocial interventions.

Art That Heals

THE ROLE OF CREATIVE THERAPY IN NURTURING YOUNG CANCER PATIENTS.

Expressive Arts Therapy is transforming pediatric cancer care in India, bringing emotional healing and a sense of normalcy to young warriors.

Children diagnosed with cancer endure not just physical pain but also deep emotional distress. In India, there is growing recognition that mental well-being must be integral to their treatment. Many young patients experience fear, sadness, and anxiety—often in silence. Because families may avoid discussing the illness, children are left feeling confused and isolated. Long hospital stays take them away from school and friends, creating a sense of disconnection and loss. For older children, visible changes like hair loss can shatter confidence, while cultural stigma around cancer may further exclude them from social circles. These challenges can severely impact their emotional resilience and hope.

Expressive Arts Therapy (EXAT) is emerging as a powerful way to support children through these difficulties. Across Indian hospitals, creative modalities like painting, music, movement, and storytelling are showing promising results in reducing anxiety and building emotional safety. These sessions provide children with a language beyond words to express grief, fear, and hope offering not only relief but also joy. The therapeutic impact goes beyond the individual: such sessions humanize hospital spaces, create peer bonding, and strengthen trust between caregivers and children.



At Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA), we conduct expressive arts sessions through the Giving Smiles Programme for pediatric oncology patients at public hospitals across Mumbai every week. For many children, these sessions are the highlight of their hospital routine. They look forward to the time they can laugh, play, and create freely with their friends. These moments offer more than distraction—they help children reclaim a sense of normalcy and joy within medical environments.

The children have also formed strong bonds with the facilitator, Ms. Karishma Pavaskar, whose warmth and consistency have created a safe, nurturing space. Through this connection, many children now feel comfortable sharing their fears, hopes, and stories reminding us all that they are not just patients, but children first.

As India moves toward a more holistic model of cancer care, expressive arts therapy is not merely a complementary practice: it is a vital thread in the fabric of healing. It reminds us that while treatment saves lives, creative expression helps children truly live through them.

INTEGRATION AND IDENTITY

-Yuvette Dsa, Facilitator.



“

Over the months, I feel like I have established an identity for myself and for the children. This took quite some time and consistency which looked like , even just “showing up”. What inspired me to make this was both the dual and collective relationship I have with the children. I have had several tiny moments along the past few months that have allowed me to connect with the children. I’ve also had wonderful moments of warmth that I’ve felt after interacting and playing with the group everytime I went home. Their energy always changed mine, and most of the times I can say it has been greatly positive.

I am grateful to them for giving me permission to be in their space and for slow acceptance, which can be so vulnerable. I’m also thankful to myself for allowing openness and the ability to bring my own personality to the space, which was difficult in the beginning.

Here’s to more play, shenanigans, jokes and laughter while also just being a proud witness to these marvellous souls.

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INTERNS'



“This internship was made all the more special by the patience and purpose with which we were guided.”

“My internship at CPAA has been a rewarding journey, filled with learning, growth, and a deeper connection to the field of psycho-oncology.”



“My experience here has given me valuable insight into myself, both as a person and as a future mental health professional.”



“Working with CPAA has been instrumental in my skill building process. It gave me valuable insight into my self which will help me in my future endeavors.”



From pushing boundaries to building bonds, CPAA shaped my path in psycho-oncology. It taught me the value of teamwork, resilience, and the power of believing in one's potential.



This opportunity opened many doors for me, it showed several roles of a psychologist that i hadn't imagined. I'm very thankful to Karishma ma'am for everything that she has given us.



I learnt from this internship that real support is in listening with heart, not just offering solutions. It deepened my empathy, reshaping how I show up with sincerity, consistency, and care.



My journey with CPAA has empowered me with invaluable skills and a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions of healthcare.



CORNER

Every story matters. Every
emotion deserves space.
Every mind deserves care.

Brought to you by Cancer Patients Aid Association

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