Commentary

Does forest healing be a promising complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) intervention for cancer survivors?

Qiaohong Guo a, Yingchun Zeng b,∗

a School of Nursing, Capital Medical University, Beijing, China
b School of Medicine, Zhejiang University City College, Hangzhou, China

We have read with great interest the recent article entitled “A present from the forest: focus group interviews on cancer survivors’ forest experiences” by Park et al. This article raised an interesting issue about forest healing in cancer survivorship, which could serve as a good start for the discussion of naturopathic therapies, one of the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies in cancer rehabilitation. Naturopathic therapies are based on the use of natural agents such as air, water, light, heat, and the forest to help the body heal itself. However, we had one query for the authors and extended the position regarding forest healing to share with the readers.

We were impressed by the findings of the study, which were so promising and made us feel that the forest experience is wonderful for cancer survivors. However, this might be a biased conclusion as some important information was missing. Our query is how forest experiences in this article were defined? In the method section, the authors only mentioned rich experiences of visiting forests, which we believe is too vague. We wonder what was the nature of the forest experience, a casual walk just for relaxation or a designed activity with certain purposes? What did participants do during forest visiting? Did they undertake any rehabilitative activities such as meditation to relieve stress? Who were engaged in the experience, only the study participants, or accompanied by families or friends or even a therapist? What was the environment of the forest? Was it an artificial forest or a wild forest? Was it safe and enjoyable enough for healing? How often did participants visit the forest? Under what circumstances did they prefer to go? Besides enjoyable experiences, did the participants have any negative experiences with the forest? All these questions need to be clarified otherwise findings of the study could seem biased or there was a possibility of overanalyzing data. After all, going to the forest is a common leisure activity that can easily happen in daily life, but we believe that its benefits vary with the different nature of the forest experiences.

This article is so inspiring that it prompted us to think about the effect mechanism of forest healing for cancer survivors. In light of the power of nature to improve people’s self-healing ability, thus improving holistic health is consistent with the traditional Chinese philosophy of the unity of nature and man, which is an important concept of Chinese medicine inspired by traditional Chinese Taoism. According to the philosophy of the unity of nature and man, human beings are part of nature, and they live in the realm of nature, and are constantly surrounded by and interacting with it. Human beings are aware of the influence of nature in the form of the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat, and the flow of energy. Changes in nature, such as the change of seasons and regional differences, would directly or indirectly affect the human body. Natural healing emphasizes promoting human’s ‘self-healing’ process, by coexisting harmoniously with nature at physical, psychological and spiritual levels, for preventing and treating diseases, restoring, and establishing a healthy state of the human being. Natural healing programs could be effective in cancer rehabilitation by the power of nature combing with psychological techniques, which may help patients to face and live with cancer more calmly, and make meanings from the illness experiences.

We agree that forest-based interventions should be developed and would be an important complementary and alternative therapy for cancer survivors, but only if the interventions were purposively designed using rigorous scientific methods. Nowadays, people pay more attention to disease prevention and rehabilitation, CAM therapies including Chinese traditional medicine (such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and massage) are becoming a promising research area for cancer rehabilitation. In a near future, we would like to launch a special issue regarding CAM therapies in cancer care for the Asia-Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing in 2023.

Declaration of competing interest

None declared.

References

1. Park EY, An MY, Sung JH. A present from the forest: focus group interviews on cancer survivors’ forest experiences. Asia-Pac J Oncol Nurs 2022. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apjon.2022.100105.
2. Natural Cancer Institute. Complementary and alternative medicine. https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/cam. Accessed on June 20, 2022.