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The use of “art” as a resource in recovery from the impact of sexual abuse in childhood: A qualitative systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Background: A qualitative systematic review was undertaken to identify the therapeutic impact of arts-based activities as experienced by adults sexually abused in childhood.

Methods: Sixteen studies, identified through a systematic search protocol, were included in a thematic synthesis. Quality of studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme tool.

Findings: Arts-based activities were identified as offering a safe space, in which to find a voice, to engage in self-exploration, and to communicate experience and connect with others where a new sense of self and empowerment could emerge.

Conclusion: Creative activities can play a significant role in the unique paths to recovery that sexual abuse survivors develop. Limitations to the review derive from the small number of papers, methodological weaknesses of the studies and the variation in focus. More research is needed into impact of specific media, and barriers and enablers to using creative activities as a resource.

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KEYWORDS

Arts-based activities; sexual abuse; recovery; qualitative systematic review

Background

Though the long-term impact of sexual abuse in childhood varies according to individual circumstances, research evidence shows significant correlations with a variety of adult mental health issues notably trauma (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicide, addiction, self-harm, and with physical ill health in later life (Anda et al., 2006; Cutajar et al., 2010; Jonas et al., 2011; van der Kolk, 2015). Such early trauma interferes with normal developmental processes and can affect every aspect of, an individual’s functioning and relationships. In particular, the capacity to integrate emotional, sensory and cognitive information (Glaser, 2000; Teicher, 2002; van der Kolk, 2015) and the regulation of emotional and neurophysiological states may be adversely impacted (Fonagy et al., 2002; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2015).

Many factors determine the severity, form and duration of post-traumatic “symptoms” experienced by the survivor of child-sexual abuse. These include frequency and form of abuse, relationship to the perpetrator, age, level of experienced helplessness, reactions of others to any disclosure and the support and therapeutic resources available (Cutajar

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et al., 2010; Jonas et al., 2011; Levine, 2010). The multi-faceted and diverse “symptom profile” of survivors presents considerable challenges in identifying and evaluating effective therapeutic approaches. The unique characteristics of individuals, their abuse experiences and related impact suggest that different approaches to, and personalised components of therapy are likely to be required (Taylor & Harvey, 2010).

The evidence for the therapeutic role of creative therapies in the recovery of adults and children from the effects of abuse is growing (e.g. Avrahami, 2005; Malchiodi, 2015; Schouten et al., 2015). Creative therapies utilise a form of arts practice, for example, visual art, music, dance or drama, as a medium for expression in a relationship with a therapist as an agent for therapeutic change, where the process of creating is emphasised rather than the product of the activity (C.A. Malchiodi, 2014). Creating “art” in the presence of a therapist, or with the therapist, may be seen as therapeutic in itself, and/or understood as a means of further exploration through verbal and non-verbal exchanges with the therapist. In working with trauma, creative expression through an art form is seen as having the potential to safely bring into awareness, contain, and transform aspects of personal experience that are hard to access verbally (Avrahami, 2005; van der Kolk, 2006; Crenshaw, 2006). Working with the therapist through a creative medium can also re-establish a healthy attachment relationship (Klorer, 2008).

Whilst the creative therapy literature attests to the therapeutic impact of the creative medium itself (Malchiodi, 2014), this cannot be isolated from the relational context of working with the therapist. For individuals who are unable to access therapy, who choose not to, or who have completed a course of therapy, creative expression may offer a beneficial, readily available therapeutic resource for self-exploration, personal development and well-being (Daykin, 2020).

Existing published systematic reviews examining the research studies on engagement in creative activities in everyday life evidence a range of psychological and physiological health benefits, including reduction in stress, anxiety, mood disturbances and depression (Daykin et al., 2018; Fancourt et al., 2014; Sheppard & Broughton, 2020; Stuckley & Nobel, 2010). Writing about traumatic events and the emotions linked to these experiences has been linked to improvement in mood and reduction in physiological symptoms such as blood pressure (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Artmaking can function as a refuge or distraction from intense emotions, providing an absorbing activity that engages the individual in a state of being, akin to aspects of meditation/mindfulness (Belkofer et al., 2014; Lusebrink & Alto, 2004; Sandmire et al., 2016) and “flow” experience (Csikzentmihalyi, 1996). Flow is associated with psychological well-being, through a variety of factors, which include fostering autonomy and accomplishment, living more vividly in the present moment with intense focus and concentration, and loss of sense of self which is strengthened on emerging from the flow state. Systematic reviews examining the impact of arts practice for individuals with mental health problems (Stickley et al., 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2018) identify positive effects such as increased self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-esteem; sense of meaning and purpose; empowerment and increased resilience. These aspects are clearly relevant to the recovery, daily functioning and mental well-being of sexual abuse survivors. There have been no systematic reviews specifically on the impact of arts-based activities for survivors of child sexual abuse.

Review question

The central questions of this systematic review were: (a) to identify and develop a deeper understanding of the therapeutic aspects of arts-based activities (the “*what*”) and (b) to identify processes by which engagement in arts activities may affect recovery and well-being (the “*how*”) for adult survivors of sexual abuse in childhood and (c) to critically appraise the methodological strength and quality of the included studies.

Method

The protocol was developed following the guidelines and checklists outlined by the Cochrane Organisation (Higgins et al., 2019) and the Joanna Briggs Institute (Aromataris et al., 2015). The review was registered with PROSPERO (CRD 42019152464) and follows PRISMA guidelines for reporting systematic reviews. The PICO framework was used to formulate the review question and identify clear inclusion/exclusion criteria (Table 1).

Published studies in peer reviewed journals using any qualitative research design or first-hand accounts were included. The full text of included studies needed to be available in English.

Search strategy

The databases EBSCO PsycINFO, CINAHL plus, MEDLINE, Art and Architecture, Arts and Humanities full text, AMED; OVID Embase Classic +Embase; ProQuest ASSIA and SCOPUS were searched from inception to 27/1/2020.

The following combinations of keywords were used – Search 1(S1): art OR arts OR creat* OR draw* OR paint* OR sculpt* OR film OR writing OR poetry OR stor* OR music OR song OR dance OR drama; Search 2(S2): recover* OR resource OR heal* OR well-being OR wellbeing OR therap* OR benefi*; Search 3(S3): “sexual abuse” OR incest OR rape OR “sexual victimi?ation” OR “sexual assault” OR “sexual exploitation”; Search 4(S4): (S1 AND S2 AND S3)

Studies were identified through a three-stage process, filtering out by (1) title, (2) abstract and (3) full article. Additional studies were identified from reference lists of the included articles and forward tracked using Google Scholar. The first reviewer (AR) undertook the initial screenings at all three stages. Excluded studies at stages 1 and 2 were

Table 1. PICO framework (eligibility criteria).

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Adults (over 18 yrs) sexually abused in childhood or early to mid-adolescence	Children and young people under 18 years, at the time of data collection.
Intervention/ Phenomenon of interest	Participation in art-based activities (including visual arts, writing, drama, music, dance, performance) outside of a creative therapy context. Arts activities as factors in the recovery and well-being of survivors of sexual abuse in childhood.	Arts activities within a creative therapy process (including drama therapy, dance therapy, art therapy, music therapy, writing within a therapeutic relationship)
Comparison Outcomes/ Evaluation	First and second order constructs: participant quotes; experience; perceptions; understanding; interpretations; themes.	Studies which report only efficacy measures, with no qualitative data.

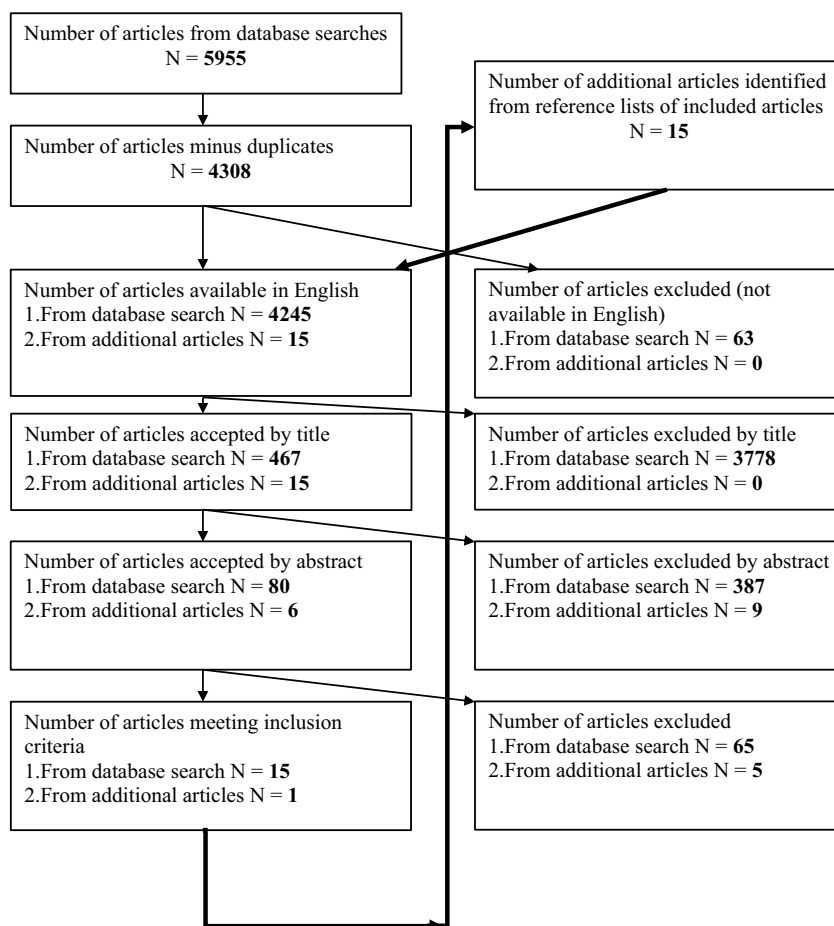


Figure 1. Checklist of included and excluded articles (Data extraction stages 1 & 2).

screened by the second reviewer (EJ) and in the event of any discrepancies were reinstated. Both first and second reviewers independently assessed the full manuscripts against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Disagreements were discussed and consensus reached.

The broad search (S4) resulted in 5,955 articles. Of these, 15 studies met the inclusion criteria. One additional article resulted from searching reference lists of included articles. A total of 16 studies were included in the review. (Figure 1 below)

Quality of included studies

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP: CASP International Network, 2019) qualitative checklist was used to assess the quality of the included studies.

Table 2. Data from included papers csa = childhood sexual abuse.

Author/ Publication year / Country	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
L. Anderson & Gold, 1998 Canada	Creative connections: The healing power of women's art and craft work.	Unspecified number of art groups, women participants.	Visual media – painting, drawing, collage, clay	Account of a Case study (group) Personal reflection.	Externalizing and resolving feelings. Connecting to creative selves. Self-discovery. Transformation and change made visible. Significance of being in a group as motivating, acting as witness and empowering.	Categories not rated Moderate
K.M. Anderson & Heirsteiner, 2007 USA	Listening to the stories of adults in treatment who were sexually abused as children.	27 survivors of csa, 2 men; ages 25–68 yrs. 93% white, 82% heterosexual, long-term mental health problems.	Journaling.	Narrative and Grounded theory. Interviews (group)	Journaling – resource (struggle for coherence and cohesion) – expressing self and being seen, seeing progress over time, making real, re-connecting with feelings' a lifesaver.	8/1/0 High
DiPalma, 1994 USA	Patterns of coping and characteristics of high-functioning incest survivors.	15 women aged 21–49 yrs., incest in childhood.	Writing stories, poetry, art and drama activities.	Phenomenological Semi-structured interviews	Use of creativity- writing, drama, music and dance – expressing feelings. Source of comfort and well-being. Role of fantasy and imagination. A place of escape.	5/1/3 Moderate

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Publication year / Country	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Eisenbach et al., 2015 Israel	Identification and characterization of symbols emanating from the spontaneous artwork of survivors of childhood trauma.	10 women aged 24–60 yrs. 5 of whom had experienced CSA.	Visual art.	Phenomenological/ grounded theory Analysis of artworks (379) and semi-structured in-depth interviews with each creator. Themes identified from two art therapists' independent analysis of artworks	Identification of recurrent symbols in painted works – relating to impact of the childhood trauma. Symbols present in artwork many years after the trauma. Artwork reflecting different emotional states. Making the healing process visible.	8/1/0 Moderate
Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016 UK	Blogging about sexual assault: A thematic analysis.	Blogposts of 5 survivors of CSA. 4 female and 1 male.	Text based blogs. Videos/ photographs not considered.	Thematic analysis of blogposts	Blogs – platform for expressing deeply felt emotions, a voice for empowering others through own testimony.	8/1/0 High
Glaister & Abel, 2001 USA	Experiences of women healing from childhood sexual abuse	14 women, aged 25–60 yrs. 11 white, 1 African American, 1 Native American, 1 Hispanic.	Writing, drawing and journaling.	Interpretative interactionism. Interviews	Experiential activities facilitate healing – opportunities for growth, acknowledgement and expression of vulnerability. Expressing and connecting with feelings particularly noted in drawing and writing. Interventions which encourage individualism.	6/1/2 Moderate

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Publication year / Country	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Grossman et al., 2006 USA	A gale force wind: Meaning making by male survivors of childhood sexual abuse.	16 male survivors of csa, 10 white; 2 African-American, 3 Latino, 1 Native American.	Music, painting, writing.	Approach not explicitly stated In-depth semi- structured interviews. Meaning-making content identified and categorized in codes from previous study (Grossman et al 1999).	Meaning making through action – included creative expression, 4 participants had significant involvement in various creative arts practice, only one identified this as 'crucial to his survival' – writing as place to fantasize, 'safe place to go'. Artworks made	7/1/1 High/ Moderate
Hodge & Bryant, 2019 Australia	Masking the self: Understanding the link between eating disorders and child sexual abuse.	7 women aged 20–50 yrs. Sexually abused in childhood.	Poetry and drawings.	Dialogical (Bakhtinian) collaborative thematic discourse analysis and construction of meaning with participants. Series of individual qualitative interviews. Account of a Case study.	Artworks made communication about csa easier. Channeling emotions whilst also being able to hide. Drawing attention to what is below the surface, to fragmented sense of self. Art facilitating movement from internal to external expression, silence to voice, access experiences that are 'beyond words'. A way of 'visualizing' pain.	7/0/2 Moderate
Hodge & Simpson, 2016 Australia	Speaking the unspeakable: Artistic expression in eating disorder research and schema therapy.	Case example (1 participant) from Hodge & Bryant, 2019, research study.	Art diary (written and visual data)	Interview and construction of meaning with participant		7/0/0 Categories 8 & 9 not applicable Moderate

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Publication year / Country	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013 Sweden	Poetry in yarn – Making sense of life experiences in the shadow of schizophrenia	Case example (1 adult woman) sexually abused in childhood, diagnosed as having schizophrenia.	Embroidery, writing.	Phenomenological Dialogical narrative of life story, over 2 yr period.	Embroidery as way of 'finding calm'; managing fear and anxiety; distraction from grief and loneliness; related to being active – liberating, working with the hands; creating something new; flow and well-being; new insights; her own language Writing (poems) more complex – a lifeline, but also 'words hurt' – associated with control by parents. Preferred art form changed over time to embroidery from words – expressing herself on her own terms. Writing story – reclaiming self, finding voice –breaking silence and secrecy. Layers of self-learning. Offering something healing for others; activism; dispelling myths.	7/0/1 Category 8 not applicable High
Lemelin, 2006 Canada	Running to stand still: The story of a victim, a survivor, a wounded healer. A narrative of male sexual abuse from the inside.	Author – male sexually abused in childhood.	Writing.	Narrative, autoethnography.		Categories not rated Moderate

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Publication year / Country	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Levy, 1989 USA	Childhood retold: Storytelling for adults sexually abused as children.	Author – adult woman sexually abused in childhood.	Writing stories.	Reflective narrative of author's experiences of creating stories.	Writing stories – liberation, finding inner resources for healing, creativity and problem-solving. Metaphorical communication. Containing 'split-off' parts of self – later acknowledged and transformed.	Categories not rated Moderate
Ligiéro et al., 2009 USA	Childhood sexual abuse, culture and coping: A qualitative study of Latinas.	9 women, Latina, who had experienced CSA. Age 19– 43 yrs.	Writing, artistic expression.	Grounded theory. Semi-structured interviews.	Significance of cultural context (beliefs and expectations). Coping strategies – turning to the arts, reading, writing and artistic expression. 'Safe haven'. Art transforming painful experiences to something positive.	7/0/2 High

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Country	Publication year /	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Méndez-Negrete USA	2013	Expressive creativity: Narrative text and creative cultural expressions as a healing praxis.	Author – 1 adult woman, incest survivor. Mexican American.	Songwriting, sewing, painting, writing.	Narrative, autoethnographic.	Arts – voicing and documenting experiences. Intuitively recognizing creative expression as the healing processes, she needed. Unacceptability in family of certain art forms. Sewing allowed, other forms kept secret. Bringing comfort and agency. Wholeness. Release from shame and guilt, cleansing, recognizing resilience.	Categories not applicable High
Moe USA	2014	Healing through movement: The benefits of belly- dance for gendered victimization.	20 women who had experienced some sort of past 'gendered' abuse. Unclear from presentation of statistics how many) had experienced csa. From the quotes at least 4 of the participants had experienced csa.	Belly dance.	Feminist, Phenomenological Semi-structured interviews.	Dance – space for women to use their bodies in self- defined way, reclaiming the body, reconnection with self as women, feeling 'beautiful', 'whole', 'alive'. Confidence. Respite. Joy and comfort. Providing sense of family and community. Cultivating own paths to healing.	7/0/2 High

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Author/ Country	Publication year /	Title	Participants	Art activity	Method of data collection	Findings	CASP appraisal Number of Y/ N/Can't tell Value rating (of contribution to this review)
Ratcliff et al. Australia	(2002)	Journey to wholeness: The experience of engaging in physical occupation for women survivors of childhood abuse.	2 adult women who had experienced CSA.	Circus Arts (Performance).	Narrative. In depth interviews. Analysis of themes.	Reconnection to the body and integration of dissociated aspects of abuse experiences. Expressing story through the body when lacking the words to do so. Safe environment. Competence and mastery.	9/0/0 High

Data synthesis

The findings from included studies were analysed using a modified form of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This involved three stages: line by line coding, then grouping of the “free codes” into descriptive themes, from which analytic themes were developed mapped against the review questions. The analysis was primarily undertaken by the first reviewer (AR). A cross-analysis of data was carried out as an audit of the accuracy of the coding and categorising process, as outlined by Hill (2012). The second reviewer (EJ) independently coded the findings in two of the research papers. These were compared with the first reviewer’s coding and found to be consistent. The resultant higher order themes were agreed between the two reviewers. An independent analysis of this process was carried out by the third reviewer (CW) as a quality audit.

Findings

The included articles were diverse in study design and methodology, covered a range of arts practice, varied in participant number and were of variable quality (Table 2). The first-person accounts could not be mapped against CASP appraisal questions. However, they add value to the synthesis through the thickness of their data. This is in line with the principal outlined by Noblit and Hare (1988) to judge the value of each study by its contribution to the synthesis.

All the studies had methodological weaknesses. Of the 12 studies mapped against the 10-question CASP checklist only one satisfactorily met all the criteria. The critique was based on the contents of the published articles, which may not have fully reported aspects of the research design and procedures inherent to the studies. All the studies had clear aims and appropriate methodology, though the strength of rationale and detail of research methods varied. The recruitment strategy and data collection were considered appropriate for each study, though again the amount of detail given varied. There was a general lack of consideration of the researcher-participant relationship, which was only discussed in 5 of the 12 studies. The extent to which ethical issues were considered again varied, with only one study describing measures to address the impact of the research upon the participants. Data analysis procedures were described in depth in six of the studies, minimally or adequately in the others. The findings were explicit in all studies.

In the studies with a broader focus on recovery/coping, where creative practice emerged as a key factor, only the findings that related to arts engagement were included in the thematic synthesis. Similarly, selective data was extracted from Anderson and Gold (1998) and Hodge and Simpson (2016) to include the case example only. The data relating to therapeutic groups were excluded. Only data from participants who had experienced child sexual abuse, rather than other forms of abusive relationships, were included from Eisenbach et al. (2015) and Moe (2014). Only data from the participant involved in performance in Ratcliff et al. (2002) was included.

The data related to arts activities was more minimal in the “recovery” studies where arts-practice was not the main focus. A higher number of descriptive themes were generated from the personal narrative papers (Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013; Méndez-

Negrete, 2013). However, there were no unique themes here, that were not also represented in the other research studies. All the studies contained first or second order constructs, participant quotes and themes which contributed to the data synthesis.

The distribution of analytic themes across the studies is detailed in [Table 3](#).

Review question (a): therapeutic aspects of arts-based activities (the “what”)

Theme 1. A safe, life-giving space

Arts-based activities were seen as safe havens where survivors could escape and gain relief or distraction from preoccupying thoughts and feelings related to abuse.

I can't even describe the relief it was to go to dance class and just take a break from everything that I had no control over. To have something you have control over, something beautiful and something you can anticipate with joy (*Jherico* in Moe, 2014, p. 334).

Arts activities were identified as a safe base for exploring, confronting and reconnecting with difficult and painful aspects of experience. Externalizing expression in an art medium enabled a safe distance and separation for the individual from the experiences captured in the creative form. The sense of safety and trust developed in certain environments, for instance, in a dance class, (Moe, 2014), facilitating appropriate risk-taking and personal growth.

Theme 2. an alternative means for “finding a voice”

Abuse survivors encounter many obstacles, internal and external, to naming and communicating their experience. Participants described responses that were “felt” (affective experience) or were outside of conscious perception, for which there were no words or were beyond words. For some individuals, language (words, music, visual) had been appropriated or devalued by the abuser. Talking directly with someone about abuse might feel too exposing and words experienced as a barrier. Expression through an art-form was seen to offer an alternative means of communication.

A way to externalise all I had within, art became the venue by which I was able to find my voice (Méndez-Negrete, 2013, p. 318).

Theme 3: A place for self-expression, self-exploration, reflection and discovery

Arts-based activities were described as providing a space for self-expression and self-exploration. Personal experiences and feelings could be documented over time, allowing growth and development to be noted and progress to be reviewed and remembered.

... recalls her amazement at the creative work she did before she remembered her abuse. It was an explicit description of the abuse and a clear example of breaking the silence without conscious thought (1998, p22).

The creative media could capture and communicate affect and more intangible aspects of experience, which might not be so consciously accessible.



Table 3. Analytic themes across papers.

Author/ Year of Publication	Therapeutic aspects of arts-based activities									
	Safe/ Life- giving Space	Means for finding a voice	A place for self- expression and self- discovery	Share stories/ connected to others	Finding calm	Externalizing experience	Reconnecting and integrating experience – making sense	Reclaiming self	Connection, validation and empowerment	Imagining new possibilities – agency and taking risks
L. Anderson & Gold, 1998	x	x	x	x			x		x	
K.M. Anderson & Heirsteiner, 2007	x		x				x	x		
DiPalma, 1994		x		x	x					x
Eisenbach et al., 2015	x	x	x		x	x		x		x
Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	
Glaister & Abel, 2001	x		x			x				x
Grossman et al., 2006	x		x				x			x
Hodge & Bryant, 2019		x	x	x		x				
Hodge & Simpson, 2016		x	x			x				
Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Lemelin, 2006			x	x					x	x
Levy, 1989	x	x	x			x				x
Ligiero et al., 2009	x				x					x
Méndez- Negrete, 2013	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Author/ Year of Publication	Therapeutic aspects of arts-based activities						The Processes involved			
	Safe/ Life- giving Space	Means for finding a voice	A place for self- expression and self- discovery	Share stories/ connected to others	Finding calm	Externalizing experience	Reconnecting and integrating experience – making sense	Reclaiming self	Connection, validation and empowerment	Imagining new possibilities – agency and taking risks
Moe, 2014	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ratcliff et al., 2002	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x

Theme 4: A way to “share stories” and feel connected to others

Creative media provided a means for survivors to risk sharing their stories. The process of sharing might be tentative, where aspects remained hidden or masked.

Stories were shared through methods such as blogs, poetry, art diaries, curating exhibitions, writing personal accounts for publication, showing creative work to others. Sharing stories was seen as offering a voice or guide for others and was experienced as empowering.

The responses of others, in the main, enabled individuals to feel understood and lessened isolation. A sense of acceptance and belonging was created.

Although for the most part we were a group of strangers, the communality of our experience [organising art exhibition of works about incest] provided a rare atmosphere of understanding and co-operation (L. Anderson & Gold, 1998, p. 23).

However, sharing stories might also risk misunderstanding and rejection in part through the power of what was communicated (DiPalma, 1994).

Review question (b): processes by which arts activities affect recovery and well-being (the “how”)**Theme 1: “Finding calm”**

Engagement in arts-based activities provided a means of escape, distraction and relief from stress and anxiety. It was seen as a way of channelling and purging self of overwhelming thoughts and, for some individuals, an escape from self-identification as a “victim”. Creative activities were described as grounding, anchoring the survivor in the present through immersion in the activity.

You come into a state of FLOW, of well-being. An enjoyable experience (Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013, p. 734).

Survivors could derive feelings of joy and accomplishment through their creative practice.

Theme 2: Externalizing experience

Finding a way to externalize experience, rather than shutting down or being imprisoned in silence, was seen as both fraught with challenges and central to recovery. Having a channel for external expression through an art-form was described as a cathartic and liberating force.

..... my work of art gave me the insight to go deeper into the crevices of pain so I could look at it, analyse it, and reflect on the ways in which the violence shaped me to become the person I am. (Méndez-Negrete, 2013, p. 322)

Arts media had the potential to capture affect and felt-sense experience, inaccessible through words. Such expression might be the first steps in acknowledging and remembering the past. Writing and drawing could document experience which was then available for future reflection.

Theme 3: Reconnecting and integrating – making sense of experience

External expression of experience through a creative medium, was described as opening opportunities for self-reflection, new discoveries and perspectives. Expression through a creative art form could facilitate safe reconnection and integration of emotions, memories and split-off parts of self. Coherent narratives could be built from what had previously been overwhelming, chaotic or fragmented. The responses of others to being shown artwork could engender new perspectives and reflections.

The documentary aspects of creative expression through writing or art diaries provided reminders of progress that served as encouragement in more difficult stages of the recovery process.

I'm probably on my 18th journal now. It has been a lifesaver because a lot of times when I think that I am not where I want to be on my journey I can go back and go, 'Oh, I've come a long way.' And I can't discount things very easily because I have it there written on the page. (Anderson & Heirsteiner, 2007, p. 641)

Working in a creative form was seen to tap into subconscious and more spontaneous processes. This could reactivate a sense of feeling alive again from deadening experiences and acceptance of vulnerability and hurt.

I have begun to be able to face the splitting-off of major parts of myself as well as my isolation which was both created by the splitting and was essential to maintain it. I sense that these stories reflect the healing process which evolved beyond my awareness (Levy, 1989, p. 66).

Specific benefits were described as emerging from working with particular media, for example, forms of dance and performance facilitating a new sense of relating to the body and affective and sensory experiences.

Theme 4: Reclaiming self

Abuse can leave individuals with a distorted and fragmented experience of self. The process of externalization, reconnection and integration of these different aspects was seen to lead to establishing a new sense of self, that was whole and authentic.

I was severely sexually abused as a child. When a survivor is assaulted, they, we, disassociate, and also it incorporates the inability to know how the body moves in space. Belly dance kind of heals all that. The movement, the gentle movement, in giving to your body, finding it, getting strength. The acceptance of your body as a beautiful thing that you can move around. It gets you in touch with being a woman, with what you were meant to be, how you were meant to move. It's your true self. You're being authentic (Reba in Moe, 2014, p. 333).

Perceptions of self that were based on "deficit" could shift, for example, moving from a self-identification as victim to survivor and wounded healer (Lemelin, 2006. p 339). Arts-based activities were described as enabling the individual to find their own language with which to express themselves and to reclaim ownership of their own experience.

Theme 5: Finding connection, validation and empowerment

Survivors described growing in self-confidence and self-worth through creative activity. Satisfaction, sense of achievement and mastery were gained through creative expression. Finding a voice for experiences that had been silenced was, in itself, empowering. Feeling understood and finding communality of experience brought a new sense of belonging and self-acceptance.

It gave me the ability to hold my head up. It gave me the ability to stand up for myself, to say 'I deserve to do this. I want to do this.' It allowed me to push through, to take risks, to move forward in spite of all that emotion and fear. It gave me a sense of self. In terms of healing hurt, it gave me a family I never had (Aziza in Moe, 2014, p. 333).

Self-worth could grow through the recognition that creative work was powerful testimony which affectively communicated and evoked responses in others. Sharing stories and creative work was seen as providing a voice and guide for others on their recovery journeys. It moved personal experience into a wider political arena, through awareness-raising, advocacy and activism (Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016).

Theme 6: Imagining new possibilities and having agency – taking risks

The imagination was described as a springboard for envisaging new possibilities.

I have gone into this and out of so many dead-end streets, and the person I finally met was myself. So, I took hold of me. I found health in my own hands. NOT DOING became DOING. My own springboard (Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013, p. 734).

For survivors of sexual abuse who had shut down and were silenced, arts-based media could be the first steps in finding agency and offered a safe space where risks could be taken to confront, face and transform difficult aspects of experience.

Discussion

The review findings support the concept of “recovery” from child sexual abuse as a journey; a uniquely personal, ongoing non-linear process often involving struggle. Creating artwork in various media was identified as a key resource in this process by the participants in these studies. In different ways all the studies in this review add weight to the description in Leamy et al. (2011) that recovery is “individual, idiosyncratic and complex” (p. 450), and highlight the significance of individuals’ “defining and cultivating their own paths to healing” (Moe, 2014, p. 337).

Arts-based activities were acknowledged to offer a safe, life-giving space, where self-expression and exploration could take place. Being able to find a voice for experiences that were silenced or could not be accessed through words, was empowering and opened up the potential for new discoveries and perspectives. In turn, this enabled more coherent self-narratives to be built. Several studies commented on creative media helping to re-integrate disassociated aspects of experience (Anderson & Gold, 1998; Hodge & Bryant, 2019; K.M. Anderson & Heirsteiner, 2007; Levy, 1989; Méndez-Negrete, 2013; Moe, 2014; Ratcliff et al., 2002). Through this process a new sense of self and identity could evolve.

Communication of experience was an important theme, countering the secrecy and isolation surrounding abuse. The responses of others to the artworks potentially led to feeling understood and gaining a sense of belonging and connection. However, it was noted that others' reactions were not always positive (DiPalma, 1994). Fawcett & Shrestha (2016) addressed the need to research the potential impact of trolling and negative comments on survivors' experience of writing blogs. Sharing creative work was seen as providing a voice and guide for others on their recovery journeys (Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; Karlsson & Malmqvist, 2013). Lemelin (2006) attributed embarking upon writing his own story to having read and been inspired by the narratives of other sexual abuse survivors.

An individual's unique history and experiences were seen to impact on whether a creative activity was identified as a resource for "recovery". For instance, in Méndez-Negrete's narrative account, music's potential as a creative channel was destroyed by the perpetrator's use of music to "drown out the screams of his violations" (p321). Not only could different media be selected or found to externalize and process experience, dependent on the individual, but this choice might change over time according to need. Activities could lend themselves to particular aspects of recovery, for instance, dance restoring a positive connection to the body and sexual self (Moe, 2014).

The presence of creative activities in the cultural domain during childhood was seen by Méndez-Negrete (2013) to be an empowering familiar resource that could be drawn upon later in her recovery process. However, in the study by Grossman et al. (2006) where four of the participants were professional artists, only one linked use of his creative medium to his recovery process. It may be that a professional emphasis on "product" precluded the possibility of using it for creative self-expression for these participants. There is a need for future research to examine the factors that enable or impede individuals to use arts activities as a personal resource in recovery. Anderson and Gold (1998) assumed that the women participating in their creative expression groups would continue working on their own art for self-care and healing independently, after the groups had finished. This was not the case. The women wanted witnesses to their journeys. This raises a number of interesting questions about the significance of "audiencing" of the artworks. There is a need for further research into the functions of a witness and whether this is similar to or different from art as therapy in the presence of the therapist. It would also be important to distinguish the circumstances when creative expression for survivors is a private to-self communication and when it becomes a more public communication.

The majority of the papers in this review focussed on individuals' experiences and individual recovery. Though expression through an art medium was seen as providing a "voice for others" and empowering connectedness in eight of the included papers, the impact of the wider socio-political environment on recovery and well-being was generally unacknowledged. Exceptions to this were found in papers which explored cultural factors (Ligiéro et al., 2009; Méndez-Negrete, 2013); gender-aware perspectives on the pathologizing and disempowering aspects of the medical model (Hodge & Bryant, 2019) and the impact of racism, financial hardship and sense of alienation from professional therapy services for men of colour (Grossman et al., 2006).

The importance of individual narratives is evident, both for the individuals themselves and as inspiration for others on their own recovery journeys. However, as Harper and Speed (2012) comment these need to be situated within the wider social context. There is a need for future research to take more account of intersections with socio-political factors.

Implications for practice

This review provides evidence of the importance of creative activity in recovery and well-being for many sexual abuse survivors. It points to the need to recognise individual pathways to recovery, in which creative activities may play a key role. The review suggests that arts-based activities can function both as a place of escape and calm, and as a powerful channel, evoking and enabling reconnection with feelings and experiences.

For professionals there is an implication to work collaboratively with survivors to support the development of their unique, personalised recovery process, rather than having a “one size fits all” approach. What may be experienced as helpful, in terms of focus, timing, pacing and specific creative medium, will vary according to the individual, their history, current circumstances and needs. In addition, the recovery process may not be linear and creative activities that are identified as helpful strategies/resources for recovery may change over different stages in the process.

Beyond the individual, there is a need to support and resource community activities which provide safe and supportive spaces for survivors to come together to continue their creative practice on an informal basis and to connect with others. Individual recovery narratives need to be located within a framework that takes account of the wider socio-political context, access to power resources and the impact of inequalities. There is an onus on professionals not to impose pre-defined recovery models on the individual and to be sensitive to language and conceptions of mental health that may pathologize the individual. Creative activities can offer individuals an empowering way to communicate and connect with others and to move personal experience into a wider political arena.

Limitations of the research

There were limitations to the review. The targeted search strategy and inclusion criteria resulted in a small number of studies meeting the requirements for inclusion. Our protocol may have led to other useful contributions being overlooked, given that sexual abuse is an underlying factor in many mental health and physical conditions. Studies were excluded where it was unclear which of the findings (within a diverse participant sample) could be attributed to survivors of sexual abuse in childhood or where the abuse occurred beyond our age parameters. However, the inclusion criteria were determined to ensure a robust search strategy to answer the focussed review question using established guidance procedures.

Though we have excluded studies where creative activities were explicitly integrated into work with a professional trained therapist, it is possible that individuals in the included studies may have at some stages been in formal therapy alongside their independent creative practice, and therapeutic benefits derived from this combination rather than the activities in isolation.

The included studies varied in methodological quality. Consideration of the relationship between researcher and participants was generally neglected in the published articles. Given the integral nature of reflexivity to good qualitative research this absence is striking. The overall quality judgment was based on a combination of the CASP questions and value of data to *this* thematic synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Eight studies were rated as high or high/moderate value; the other eight as moderate. It is clear that further research of high methodological quality and rigour is needed in this field.

Modifications had to be made to the thematic synthesis methodology to ensure that only the sections of findings which met the review protocol inclusion criteria were included in the data analysis. The amount of data relevant to this review was limited in some of the studies.

The analytic themes developed in the review overlap, and though grounded in the data, are clearly interpretations. Different reviewers replicating the study may have grouped the findings in other ways and generated different themes.

The included studies were restricted to those in English language. Where demographic data was recorded, participants in most of the studies tended to be white women, and it can be assumed that by choosing to participate they were individuals who were willing to talk about their experiences. It will be important to redress this in future studies and conduct research on diverse populations' experiences of creative activities and recovery from sexual abuse, taking account of the interrelationship between individuals and wider socio-environmental factors.

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