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Honors Capstone

The Rise of Art Therapy to Improve Mental Health

A little girl sits at the table with a crayon in her hand, she draws a picture of a naked little girl with an oversized male figure in the back. This is art therapy.

A depressed teenage boy rents out studio space at a local dance studio and relies on music to move his body. This is art therapy.

An adult with down syndrome paints on a blank canvas throughout the day, bringing his favorite work home to his caregiver. This is art therapy.

Art therapy is a method of treatment used within a broad spectrum of patients. There are many forms of art therapy: it can be done through music, drama, painting or drawing, and dance-movement. These methods of therapy can be used for mentally disabled patients, PTSD victims, persons facing a phobia, non-vocal patients, and patients with psychosis. On top of all these situations, art therapy is also utilized in traditional therapy with neurotypical patients. The common goal of art therapy varies on the patient. In some cases, the common goal is a lift of trauma or even full recovery, in other cases, it is better communication or relief of pain. Art therapy has allowed many to surpass these mental illnesses while in other situations it has allowed many to live with these mental illnesses in a controlled and healthy way. Art therapy has been an underappreciated form in relation to all that it offers patients. Art allows patients to transcend into an alternate reality within their therapy and escape through a creative outlet. These

creative outlets appear in different ways for different patients, differing from music and dance therapy to drama or visual arts therapy.

Understanding Art Therapy

Before understanding the relationships between the methods of art therapy and the types of mental illnesses, we must understand them separately. *Music therapy* typically entails either making or experiencing music. This could mean that the patient is creating music on a keyboard, a drum, a guitar, etc. This could also mean that the patient is listening to music of varying types either aloud or through headphones. The listening aspect of music therapy can branch into a dance-movement form of therapy. This is when the patient will create a form of art movement with their bodies while listening to the music playing. The art can take place here either through the choreography or through the emotive performance of an already choreographed piece of work. Another form of art therapy is *drama therapy*, this is a form of therapy that uses acting or singing. The patient typically will do this in a group setting. Drama therapy can be useful in the expression of bigger emotions one may feel shame for feeling within their own space. This form can seem less personal but extremely useful as the group setting can aid patients in feeling supported. *Visual arts* are the things we typically think of when we think of art or an art class. These are painting, drawing, ceramics, photography, crafts, etc. This therapy can be done individually, in groups, or within a patient-therapist-art trio. It is common for talk therapy to mix with visual arts as a way to relax the patient and create an environment that is comfortable. This form of art therapy is common as it is extremely accessible, simply needing a pen and paper at the most simple level.

A Triangular Relationship

There is a triangular relationship present within art therapy; this is between the patient, the therapist, and the art. During the sessions, there is an emphasis placed on specific corners of the triangle. At times this emphasis could be placed on the corner that connects the art and the patient, whereas at a later stage the emphasis could be placed on the therapist and the art.¹ Each stage is equally important. The shifting emphasis is reflective of the stage or focus of the treatment. Typically, the initial emphasis is between the therapist and the patient, creating a safe space and a bond. After this is asserted, the emphasis shifts to the patient and the art. The emphasis on the art and the therapist is usually an interpretive stage for the therapist, where the therapist can collect insight on the creations. There is no specific order in which these emphasis shifts will go, as they vary from patient to patient, therapist to therapist, and art to art.

The typical initial emphasis being among the patient and the therapist is an opportunity for a safe and trusting relationship to occur. The environment formed here is vital to success in later developments. If this initial relationship is not built in a careful and supportive way, the patient will be less inclined to explore art with the therapist. Even if art is explored, it can be unconsciously closed off from the patient's emotions if they do not feel comfortable. This initial relationship is also vital in order for the therapist to best guide the patient towards a proactive method of art. As the patient and the therapist establish their relationship, the therapist will develop insight into the patient and which path forward best suits their needs.

The notes that a therapist takes during a therapy session are vital to the process of the therapy. In order to further the connection and deeper the relationship between the three aspects of this triangle the sessions must be documented. Within notetaking there is a distinction

¹ "Art Therapy." EFPT Psychotherapy Guidebook. PubPub, July 7, 2019. <https://epg.pubpub.org/pub/art-therapy/release/3>.

between recording data and taking notes. Patient data, including demographics and numeral matters, is recorded within the “data” aspect of this. This can remain separate from any content that arises within a session. Although correlations can be found among the data and the notes, they are separate spheres.²

Art Therapy as Communication

Within art therapy, words no longer are the immediate mode of communication. As the process continues, the use of words may even decline. This is because the art becomes the main form of communication. In many cases, words are an inadequate form of communication when it comes to what a patient must exert. For many patients, a safer form is needed. Art becomes that medium.³

As a patient works on art, the therapist must practice active listening. This means that while a patient is working on a piece of art the therapist must listen to minor comments that the patient makes while working on the piece. During this, the therapist must note not only what the patient says, but also how they say it. How they say it could include the quality of speech they place forward as well as any tone they offer with it. By understanding how they say it, the

² Murphy, Antonia. “Why Do We Write Notes?” *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations* 27, no. 2 (May 2021): 193–97. doi:10.1080/14753634.2020.1833863.

Regev, Dafna. “Arts Therapies with Children and Adolescents.” MDPI Books. 40. MDPI, Basel, February 13, 2023. <https://www.mdpi.com/books/book/6821-arts-therapies-with-children-and-adolescents>.

therapist can note stress, articulation, confidence, fear, etc.⁴ Through this, they can better understand the impact the art they are working on has on them.

Therapists must proceed with caution during communication with a patient who is actively using art. The patient must lead the conversation if there is a conversation to be had. This is not the time when a therapist should break the barrier. As unintentional as it may be, most interventions will come across as a judgment or will distract the patient from the internal progress they have made. Because this is such a sensitive time to verbally communicate, the therapist can interpret and engage with the nonverbal communications being sent from the patient. This is body language. Nonverbal communication could be looks, the distance between the patient and the art or the therapist, and the movements the patient is making⁵.

Very commonly, the emotions being processed can be done so in an unconscious manner. Therefore, the documentation through notes of the body language, the verbal communication, and the art is vital in collecting insight on the patterns and structure of the process. These notes are deeply personal, to the point where it has continuously become illegal in varying countries for psychotherapy notes to be used in legal settings without the written consent of the patient.⁶ Being able to freely connect and respond to a patient is a vital component of maintaining a relationship and furthering the process in a successful way. In order to do this, it is beneficial for the therapist to take note of progress as well as negative responses the patient is having.

⁴Rubin, Judith Aron. "Decoding Symbolic Messages." Essay. In *Child Art Therapy*, 122. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2005.

⁵ Rubin, Judith Aron. "Decoding Symbolic Messages." Essay. In *Child Art Therapy*, 123. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2005.

⁶Murphy, Antonia. "Why Do We Write Notes?" *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations* 27, no. 2 (May 2021): 193–97. doi:10.1080/14753634.2020.1833863.

Art Therapy for Patients with Mental Health Issues

Now turning to art therapy as a tool for patients with mental health issues. Mentally disabled persons are people whose mental capabilities have problems in two areas: intellectual functioning and adaptive functioning⁷. These are much more common than most assume. Mental disabilities do not just mean autism or down syndrome, it also is those who suffer from depression or anxiety, ADD, Impulse Control Disorder, OCD, etc. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is suffered by those who have undergone a traumatic event in their life. This traumatic event leaves them stuck with psychological effects that are triggered by aspects of life that could relate back to the original trauma. A phobia is an extreme or irrational fear, one that cannot be explained but persists. These are usually fears that, although they have no explanation, have factors that can control one's life. Phobias can be extremely restricting and limiting over a person's overall functioning. Non-vocal patients are those who do not have the ability to speak so they must find means of communication another way. Patients with psychosis are patients that perceive or interpret reality in a way that is different from those around them⁸. This can be delusions and disorientation. Neurotypical means the patient does not display a typical pattern within their behavior or known thoughts. Neurotypical patients are patients that do not suffer from any of these, rather, they seek therapy as a means of emotional support.

Art therapy for neurotypical patients

⁷“What Is Intellectual Disability?” Psychiatry.org - What is Intellectual Disability? Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/intellectual-disability/what-is-intellectual-disability>.

⁸ “What Is Psychosis?” Mind. Accessed April 12, 2023. [https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/psychosis/about-psychosis/#:~:text=Psychosis%20\(also%20called%20a%20'psychotic,'lose%20touch'%20with%20reality](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/psychosis/about-psychosis/#:~:text=Psychosis%20(also%20called%20a%20'psychotic,'lose%20touch'%20with%20reality).

Art therapy is used in both mentally ill patients as well as in patients that seek therapy as a form of release from their daily life. This is typical talk therapy. Patients that seek help for depression and anxiety most commonly fall under this category. Many times, patients with depression and anxiety are given medication in order to alter their experience to be more positive and to have less symptoms. This use of medicine to limit these symptoms is referred to as pharmacotherapy. In a study done with patients who use pharmacotherapy the use of art psychotherapy was added to their treatment for six weeks. Within this study a pre and post-depression scale was used, and it found that art therapy patients had post results with lower depressive symptoms than those who strictly underwent pharmacotherapy and did not add art therapy.

Also, within this study, it was found that a combination of forms of therapy can be quite effective in comparison to one form of therapy. This is called combined therapy. By adding art therapy to either psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy, the patient is benefiting in a much stronger way.

The response from patients within this study varied as some participants did not maintain their art therapy and rather continued with strictly pharmacotherapy after just one art therapy session. A possible explanation for this is known as “treatment burden,” which is when the patient is going through so many treatments that they feel overworked⁹.

Art therapy can be particularly beneficial when it occurs in earlier stages of the life, such as childhood. During this time, the therapy can be seen as fun and more natural as it expands on

⁹ Regev, Dafna. “Arts Therapies with Children and Adolescents.” MDPI Books. MDPI, Basel, February 13, 2023. <https://www.mdpi.com/books/book/6821-arts-therapies-with-children-and-adolescents>.

an activity many children do or wish to do in their free time. This making it easier to establish a positive relationship between the patient, the art, and the therapist.¹⁰

Within art therapy in adolescents, the act of alleviating stress as well as both anxiety and depressive symptoms occurs, while simultaneously increasing the patients personal development and tool box of resources. This way, the patient is dealing with their mental health condition while also teaching themselves how to continue to combat it.¹¹ Many times, art therapy does not have one aimed goal, but rather a general goal of progress and the process. This allows the process to truly focus on healing rather than an end goal.¹²

A response common from patients in neurotypical art therapy is a sense of relief. This relief stems from the empowerment and joy that is a result of learning to live and cope with their struggles. This empowerment leads to a hopeful inclination to continue the process. There is a combination of the excitement of starting something new and the joy of beginning to see results that contribute to a patient wishing to continue the process.¹³

Art therapy for patients with disabilities

¹⁰ Regev, Dafna. "Arts Therapies with Children and Adolescents." MDPI Books. 28. MDPI, Basel, February 13, 2023. <https://www.mdpi.com/books/book/6821-arts-therapies-with-children-and-adolescents>.

¹¹ Sarman, Abdullah, and Ulviye Günay. "The Effect of Calligraphy as an Art Therapy Intervention Containing Religious Motifs, on the Anxiety and Depression in Adolescent Psychiatric Patients." *Journal of Religion & Health* 62, no. 2 (April 2023): 1269–85. doi:10.1007/s10943-021-01479-0.

¹² Regev, Dafna. "Arts Therapies with Children and Adolescents." MDPI Books. 40. MDPI, Basel, February 13, 2023. <https://www.mdpi.com/books/book/6821-arts-therapies-with-children-and-adolescents>.

¹³ Sarman, Abdullah, and Ulviye Günay. "The Effect of Calligraphy as an Art Therapy Intervention Containing Religious Motifs, on the Anxiety and Depression in Adolescent Psychiatric Patients." *Journal of Religion & Health* 62, no. 2 (April 2023): 1269–85. doi:10.1007/s10943-021-01479-0.

There are a range of disabilities, both physical and mental, that are treated with art therapy. Within this treatment, it is important to note that although many patients have the same diagnosis and are suffering from the same disease, they have a major component of individuality in their treatment.

In a study done within a psychiatric hospital, children with schizophrenia were brought into a room and given the same resources and freedom to explore art. All the patients studied had the same diagnosis yet responded in varying distinct individual ways¹⁴. An important discovery of this study was that an individual's diagnosis, regardless of how much it controls their life, is not a defining and all-inclusive aspect of their life. Rather, art therapy has shown the true individuality of each child under their diagnosis.

In a study done in a residential institute, an art program was established for patients with cerebral palsy. In this study, it was found that patients with more severe orthopedic disabilities like spasticity were able to utilize resources in a different way in order to best function in the art program for themselves. By doing this, these patients, who were expected to be destructive in the art room, created a way for themselves to produce their art independently and creatively while also being a part of the art therapy process¹⁵.

To give an illustration of how this is an effective and enjoyable part of their treatment is Uncle Jimmie. My uncle, Jimmie Clark, was adopted by my parents when I was 8 years old.

¹⁴ Rubin, Judith Aron. "Art Therapy from Disabled Children." Essay. In *Child Art Therapy*, 265. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2005.

¹⁵ R Rubin, Judith Aron. "Art Therapy from Disabled Children." Essay. In *Child Art Therapy*, 266. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2005.

Now, he is 59 and somehow argues with me more than my 25-year-old sister does. Jimmie has Down Syndrome and is labeled as having the mental ability equivalent to a 5-year-old.

Jimmie attends a day program called “Creative Trails.” Many of Jimmie’s previous day programs had no specialized interest, rather they were a place for him to socialize and spend a few hours a week. This day program has stimulated Jimmie. Although Jimmie cannot read or write, he can communicate now through his imagery. He does not typically utilize his art in a way that just looking at it can determine his emotions, rather it is what he does with it. Many times, Jimmie will come home from the program with paintings or pottery for my mom, with a “J” signed on the back. Other times, his caregivers at home will receive one. These are Christmas presents or random gifts. These are a way for Jimmie, who usually shows no major emotions, to express his love or gratitude for someone. In other cases, it is a way for Jimmie to show that he is mad at someone, maybe by leaving out a certain someone when unloading his gifts from the week.



Work from Jimmie’s day program that he brought home

Art is an alternative form of communication to speech. Art therapy in the study within the residential institute aided the staff in even re-diagnosing patients. Nonverbal patients, who previously struggled to communicate in the ways they were given, had a new method. The staff

found that a nonverbal patient was more neurotypical than they had once assumed, and she began to effectively communicate through her new access to the art room.

When treating a nonverbal patient, the therapist must shift from active listening to active observing. They must begin to focus not on the words and how the patient says them, but rather on the movements the patient is making, the way they are holding their pencil, the direction they are facing, and the energy they are exerting. The therapist must observe the body language of the patient. Not only can art aid a nonverbal patient in their direct communication, but it is vital in communicating their feelings and emotions for them. By drawing images that act as a metaphor to their direct emotions, they are describing to their therapist how they feel or perceive things in a way that at times can be clearer than words.

The general goal when using art therapy with nonverbal patients is to give them a form of telling their story. In some cases, trauma can inhibit speech to the point that a person will become nonverbal. Traumatic events can inhibit or lower the brain's ability to express verbally their experiences.¹⁶ By creating a medium in which nonverbal patients can communicate to their therapists, art therapy has opened up astonishing opportunities.

Art therapy for patients with PTSD, psychosis, and phobias

PTSD, psychosis, and phobias can inhibit a person's ability to function and go about common daily tasks. Art therapy is an extremely effective way of releasing this trauma without

¹⁶ Corrado, M, D Wolf, and L Bills. "Trauma Triptych: Inviting Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Art Therapy, Social Work, and Psychiatry." Home Page. International Journal of Art Therapy, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2022.2123011>.

verbally communicating through it, which can be abundantly traumatizing.¹⁷ By resourcing a form of trauma release that does not simultaneously bring up the trauma, art therapists can efficiently free the trauma being held within the patient. Creativity can be defined as “being openminded and flexible and arriving at useful or new solutions to work or living problems.”¹⁸ Creativity allows problem solving through a new lens for patients. While the patient works on being more creative, they are unconsciously also working on their skills to solve issues outside of their art.

Art therapy can be used as an intervention to the constant struggle that many patients with PTSD, psychosis, and phobias experience. Art therapy teaches both coping skill developments and how to best process trauma.¹⁹ It is necessary that the therapists within this sphere of art therapy are trauma certified, as the interventions and care present must be trauma informed. There must be an emphasis on safety and transparency between the therapist and the patient in order for the art therapy to work beneficially.²⁰

Within a study done with Nigerian refugees of Russia’s invasion on Ukraine, PTSD and art therapy’s relationship was studied. This study proved drama therapy to be the most

¹⁷ Corrado, M, D Wolf, and L Bills. “Trauma Triptych: Inviting Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Art Therapy, Social Work, and Psychiatry.” Home Page. International Journal of Art Therapy, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2022.2123011>.

¹⁸ Rothenberg, Albert. *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

¹⁹ Corrado, M, D Wolf, and L Bills. “Trauma Triptych: Inviting Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Art Therapy, Social Work, and Psychiatry.” Home Page. International Journal of Art Therapy, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2022.2123011>.

²⁰ Corrado, M, D Wolf, and L Bills. “Trauma Triptych: Inviting Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Art Therapy, Social Work, and Psychiatry.” Home Page. International Journal of Art Therapy, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2022.2123011>.

productive and beneficial form of therapy in this case. It was gathered that this was most likely due to the physical and emotional connection between the active mind and body that takes place. By stimulating both aspects, drama therapy became more successful than both music therapy and visual arts therapy.²¹

When looking at how patients have responded to such treatments, we can see a multitude of responses. Within group therapy settings, patients have shown feelings of chaos as people can chose the times they would like to be seated, working on the art, as well as the times they wish to be occupied elsewhere. This fragmentation stems from the need to make the art be by choice, and not forced onto the patients in a way that will inhibit meaningful connections²². Patients also responded to this treatment by asking for the continuation of the treatment. Once the connection to the art takes place, there becomes a want for this connection to continue to other parts of the patient's life, possibly adding art to their home life and making this therapy ongoing²³.

The Future of the Field

As art therapy continues to be explored, there is still hesitancy from both patients and therapists. Art therapy is modern and evolving, with growing interest and success, it is important

²¹Verlumun Celestine, et al. 2023. "Comparing the Effect of Social Media-Based Drama, Music and Art Therapies on Reduction in Post-Traumatic Symptoms among Nigerian Refugees of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 68 (January): e96–102. doi:10.1016/j.pedn.2022.11.018.

²² Helen Barrett, and References Allan. "Therapist and Client Experiences of Art Therapy in Relation to Psychosis: A Thematic Analysis." Taylor & Francis. Accessed April 18, 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17454832.2022.2046620>.

²³ Helen Barrett, and References Allan. "Therapist and Client Experiences of Art Therapy in Relation to Psychosis: A Thematic Analysis." Taylor & Francis. Accessed April 18, 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17454832.2022.2046620>.

to have more awareness among the public. It would be beneficial to see more training for clinicians and a greater incorporation into graduate and undergraduate curriculum.

Because art therapy relies so heavily on the triangular relationship between the patient, the art, and therapist, there is not one overarching authority present, rather the therapist acts as a guide at level with the patient. Due to this equal playing field, emotions can come up during art therapy that can be ineffectively processed. This is another aspect of art therapy that must be present within curriculum. The emotions can be brought to the surface without the therapist knowing or the patient having complete consciousness over it as it can strictly come onto the art. If certain emotions are not processed correctly, a state of higher stress or anxiety can occur for the patient and the connected and healthy relationship between the patient and the therapist can become insufficient²⁴.

To conclude, art therapy aids patients seeking help for a variety of differing matters. Art therapy appears in music, drama, visual arts, and dance-movement therapy. These methods of therapy are used for mentally disabled patients, PTSD victims, persons facing a phobia, non-vocal patients, and patients with psychosis. Art is used as a treatment and a relief system for these patients. Many times, these patients have sought alternative methods to combat their needs as art therapy is commonly not a first option, but an option that is beneficial and successful.

Art therapy can and should be utilized in psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and talk therapy as a resource and an option for combined therapy. This form of therapy proves to

²⁴“What Is Art Therapy?” Psychology.org | Psychology's Comprehensive Online Resource, August 17, 2022. <https://www.psychology.org/resources/what-is-art-therapy/#:~:text=Potential%20negative%20effects%20include%3A,if%20therapy%20is%20abruptly%20terminated.>

diminish symptoms and strain placed on a patient due to their mental health condition.

Depending on the patient, different forms of art can be the most useful whereas other forms can prove ineffective. The amount of impact that art therapy has on a patient stems from the connection they form with their triangular relationship (art, patient, therapist) as well as their willingness to go about the process.

The little girl sitting at the table with a crayon in hand now draws a picture of her favorite stuffed animal, the naked man above her no longer in her frame. This is art therapy. The process allowed the little girl to process what had happened to her.

The teenage boy continues to rent space in the community dance theater, although now he does so as a privilege, not a necessity. This is art therapy. The process allowed the depressed teenage boy to focus on his mental health in a committed way until reaching recovery.

The adult with down syndrome chooses to make a painting to hang in their own room, learning to recognize and appreciate themselves. This is art therapy. The process allowed them to learn both communicative skills as well as their own self-worth.