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Expressive Arts Therapy (Eat) in Mental Health Care

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Abstract

Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT) is an integrative therapeutic approach that uses creative modalities such as visual arts, music, dance, drama, and creative writing to facilitate emotional expression and psychological healing. Due to its holistic, client-centered, and non-verbal nature, it helps people process their emotions, internal conflicts, and traumatic experiences that may be difficult to articulate through words alone. This paper reviews the role of Expressive Arts Therapy in mental health care by reviewing existing literature. Findings from previous studies indicate that EAT contributes to the reduction of emotional distress, supports patient recovery, increase in self-esteem and self-awareness. And concluded that Expressive Arts Therapy represents a meaningful complementary approach that can enrich contemporary mental health practice and support individualized healing processes.

Keywords: expressive arts therapy, art therapy, mental health, wellness

1. Introduction

Mental Disorders recognized as a major global public health concern (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Psychotherapy and pharmacological interventions are recognized by the World Health Organization as core components of mental health care and are supported by evidence for the treatment of many mental health conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). However, some individuals experience difficulties articulating emotions and internal experiences solely through verbal modes of communication within traditional therapeutic settings (Online Therapy UK, 2025). In response to these challenges, expressive arts therapy has developed as an integrative therapeutic approach in the service of healing both mind and body, which integrate various form of creative modalities such as visual art, music, movement, drama, and creative writing within psychotherapy (Knill et al., 2001). To help clients explore feelings and thoughts that are often difficult to access through verbal communication (Malchiodi, 2022). EAT is grounded in the understanding that engagement in creative processes can support the exploration and expression of emotions and lived experiences in ways that extend beyond verbal communication (McNiff, 2004). Some professionals argue that expressive arts therapies should be clearly defined as intermodal or multimodal practices, emphasizing the use of multiple art forms within a single therapeutic process. Accordingly, multimodal expressive arts therapy has been described as an approach that combines different artistic

modalities within the therapeutic relationship and involves working across more than one medium (Malchiodi, 2003). It is commonly structured around five core modalities—visual arts, music, dance/movement, drama, and poetry or creative writing and a general art-classification model:

1.1 Types of Arts

1. **Visual Arts:** Refer to a broad category of artistic expressions that primarily engage the sense of sight. It comprises various mediums, techniques, and styles that enable individuals to express their ideas, emotions, thoughts, and perspectives. This form of art is mainly experienced visually, but it may also stimulate other sensory perceptions. Examples of visual arts include painting, drawing, and sculpture.
2. **Performing Arts:** Involve artistic activities in which artists present their work through live performance before an audience. This category of art encompasses all forms that employ the body, voice, and, at times, objects, or props to convey expression and meaning to an audience. Examples include music, dance, and opera etc.
3. **Literary Arts:** Also referred to as literature, comprise written and spoken forms of expression created to communicate ideas, emotions, and narratives through language. This form of art uses words to express ideas and can be found in novels, poems, short stories, essays, and plays. Literary art has long been a fundamental component of human culture and communication throughout history.
4. **Culinary Arts:** Represent a distinctive artistic discipline that includes the preparation, cooking, and aesthetic presentation of food in a visually and sensorially pleasing manner. It is a combination of both science and art, integrating knowledge of ingredients, techniques, and flavours with creativity and artistic expression.
5. **Applied Arts:** Refer the application of artistic skills to the creation and design of functional objects. While fine arts are primarily concerned with aesthetic or conceptual purposes, applied arts integrate utility with artistic design, creativity, and craftsmanship. This category of art involves the creation of objects that integrate functional utility with artistic value. Examples include architecture, graphic design, fashion design, and interior design (Upadhyay et al., 2024).

Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how individuals think, feel, and behave, as well as their capacity to cope with stress, maintain relationships, make decisions, and contribute to society, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO). It is an integral component of overall health and well-being, underpinning both individual and collective capacities to make decisions, build relationships, and shape the world in which we live. It is a basic human right and is essential for personal, community, and socio-economic development.

Determinants of mental health primarily include biological, psychological, and social factors. Biological determinants include physical health status, nutrition, and sleep quality. Psychological determinants refer to mental health concerns, cognitive patterns, and emotional functioning. Social determinants involve family relationships, cultural context, workplace conditions, and housing environments. Although individuals are responsible for caring for their mental health, risk factors such as negative parenting styles and bullying are commonly associated with mental health problems (Upadhyay et al., 2024).

2. Review of Literature

Engagement in artistic activities extends far beyond a recreational pastime; role in supporting psychological well-being. It is an alternative way to understand and express their inner experiences, provide individuals with a non-verbal medium to process thoughts and emotions that may be difficult to articulate through

words alone. Rather than serving solely as a leisure activity, artistic practice functions as a reflective process. One of the most notable outcomes of this process is its positive influence on mental health. Evidence from existing literatures shows how Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT) promotes self-acceptance, emotional balance, self-esteem, and self-worth compared to those who do not participate in such activities.

Study conducted by Petruzzi (2023), art therapy has its roots in both artistic expression and psychological practice. Although artistic expression has been used for centuries to communicate and cope with life events. This form of therapy produces multiple beneficial effects for many individuals (Petruzzi, 2023). According to Malchiodi (1998), art therapy supports individuals in developing a greater sense of personal control, increases self-esteem, and enables more effective self-expression and communication, leading to improved insight into their life experiences. A review study conducted by Theresa van et al. (2016) highlighted the role of art therapy in bridging the gap between therapists' theoretical knowledge and what they do in helping those with mental illnesses. Several numbers of researchers have also talked about the value of art therapy for individuals with psychosis, where from group-based art therapy indicate positive outcomes among five participants (Hilde Hanevik et al., 2013; Knut A. Hestad et al., 2013; Lars Lien et al., 2013; Hanne Stubbe Tegljaerg et al., 2013; Lars Johan Danbolt et al., 2013). While one of the evidence-based study was also conducted among 80 romanian adults which examined the effectiveness of a 12-week expressive arts therapy (EAT) intervention in improving self-esteem and reducing anxiety levels. Self-esteem and anxiety were assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) at baseline and post-intervention. The results indicated a significant increase in self-esteem and a notable reduction in trait anxiety among participants in the EAT group compared to the control group. However, no significant changes were observed in state anxiety (Constantin et al., 2025). Crawford et al. (2012) examined the effectiveness of group art therapy as an adjunctive treatment for individuals with schizophrenia. In these studies, participants were given access to a range of creative materials and were encouraged to express themselves freely through artistic activities. Multiple clinical trials have examined the role of art therapy in the treatment of schizophrenia and have reported mixed but notable outcomes. Preliminary findings from a study conducted by Crawford et al. indicated similar results when evaluating the effectiveness of group art therapy for individuals with schizophrenia. In this study, participation in group art therapy did not lead to significant improvements in overall functioning, general mental health, or other health-related outcomes among the participants. However, a separate pilot study conducted by Montag et al. (2014), evaluated the feasibility and therapeutic impact of psychodynamic group art therapy for patients experiencing acute psychotic episodes, which implemented art therapy interventions that focused on supporting the creative process and enhancing patients' interpretation of their artwork. Participants who received art therapy shows a significant reduction in both positive and negative symptoms of schizophrenia compared to those receiving standard care. Furthermore, post-treatment and follow-up assessments indicated that the art therapy group exhibited minimal positive symptoms of schizophrenia when compared with patients receiving conventional treatment (Montag et al., 2014). The study identified a clear association between engagement in the arts and mental health outcomes. Participants who spent 100 or more hours annually in artistic activities (approximately two or more hours per week) reported significantly higher levels of mental well-being compared to those with lower levels of engagement (Davies et al., 2016). Also, clinical evidence indicates that engagement in artistic activities supports patient recovery, enhances relaxation, and contributes to reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Staricoff, 2004) (Star & Cox, 2008). Among older adults, participation in artistic activities has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms, enhance self-worth, and support positive aging (Greaves & Farbus, 2006) (Parkinson, 2009). In settings where large-scale studies have been carried out, participation in the arts has been associated with improved happiness and lower stress (Michalos & Kahlke, 2010) (Davies, Knuiman, Wright, & Rosenberg, 2015).

According to Song et al. (2023), incorporating expressive arts therapy into mental health courses, as opposed to traditional instructional methods, enhances college students' mental health, increases classroom satisfaction, and self-affirmation, particularly among first-year students. A pilot study found that expressive arts therapy (EAT) is a feasible and effective intervention for adults with mild cognitive impairment (MCI), producing beneficial effects on overall cognitive function, language abilities, anxiety, depression, and quality of life. The authors recommend conducting randomized controlled trials with larger sample sizes to further validate these findings (Yan et al., 2021)..

2. Conclusion

Based on the existing literature reviews, substantial evidence indicates that both art therapy and expressive arts therapy have a significant positive impact on mental health. A wide range of studies report positive associations between expressive arts therapy and psychological well-being among individuals with various mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression. Clinical evidence indicates that engagement in artistic activities supports patient recovery and enhances relaxation. By providing creative and non-verbal modes of expression, expressive arts therapy helps overcome the constraints of exclusively verbal therapeutic approaches, particularly for individuals who find it difficult to verbalize their internal experiences. Taken together, Expressive Arts Therapy represents a meaningful complementary approach that can enrich contemporary mental health practice and support individualized healing processes.

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